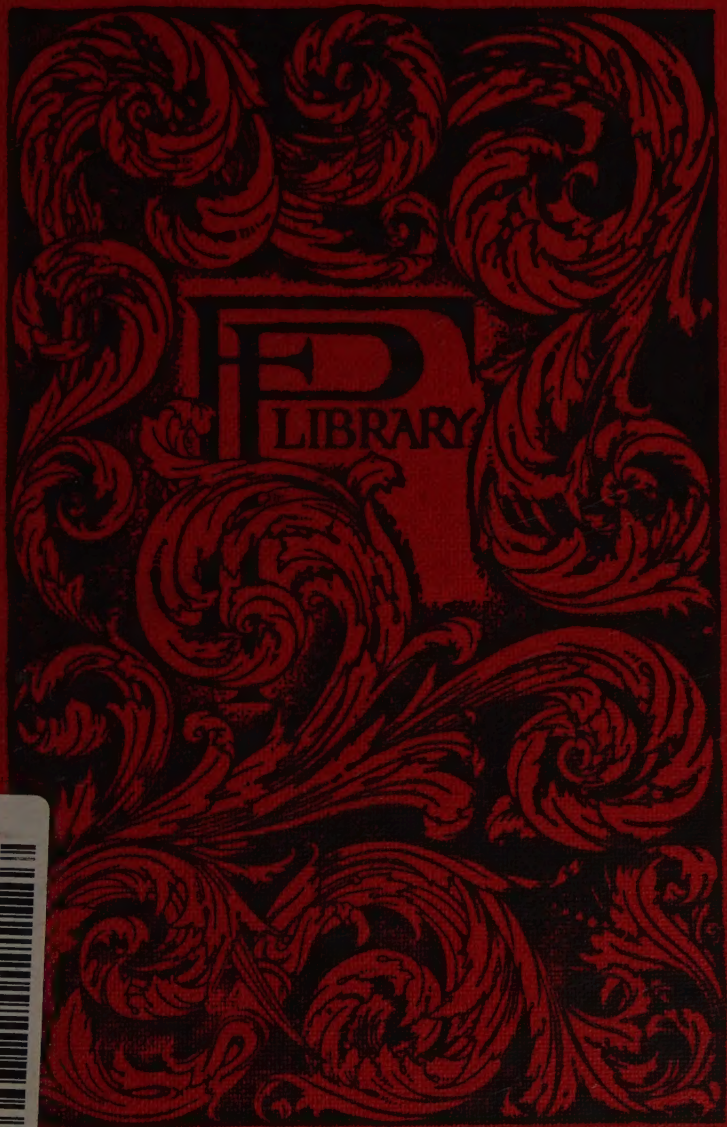

KU-426-779

THE BEAUTIFUL DEVIL

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BY

DETECTIVE DUNN

LONDON
FEDERATION PRESS, LTD.
61-62 Chancery Lane, W.C.2.

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THE BEAUTIFUL DEVIL.

CHAPTER I.

THE LIGHT IN THE BELFRY WINDOW

THE Christmas bells were crashing their final peal. A shadowy figure, stealing rapidly along in the shadow of the stone wall bordering Lanchester Church, stopped to listen. A gaunt, half-starved man, with the eyes of a fugitive, and a face almost as white as the snow beneath his feet.

His coat, an ulster, was a mass of tatters. It came down to his heels, and well it was it did so, for beneath was a convict's tunic and knickers.

His pause was but momentary. Thinking the service had ended and fearing the closing of the church door he risked entering the porch, the soft monotone of the vicar's voice pronouncing the benediction reached him. He would have retreated, but a step outside warned him. The red baize-covered doors leading from the porch into the church were open. He slipped behind one. The worshippers shuffled out. He was not seen.

The bells ceased, and down came the ringers through the narrow, arched door, with the winding steps behind. The last one left the narrow door open.

The temptation of a bed under a roof was irresistible. For three nights he had slept in the open, with an icy, sleet-laden wind beating about his chilled, half-starved body; and now had come the snow—ready to betray his every footstep.

The people were gone—all save the vicar who was hovering about the chancel.

The fugitive formulated his plan. He would steal

up to the belfry and after a rest he would descend, possess himself of the collection box and continue his tramp. Closing behind him the belfry door he toiled up the winding staircase.

The belfry was a square chamber, and a fire was smouldering in a sort of iron basket on legs. The shivering visitor banked it up with fresh wood and kneeling in front blew the embers into a flame.

He threw himself on the floor as near as he could to the stove with safety. The heat made him drowsy and he closed his wearied eyes.

The vicar meanwhile was pacing the chancel—a tall and spare figure. Just now his eyes were bent on the tesselated pavement and he moved with the slow measured step of one absorbed in thought. He was talking to himself.

"Five years ago this very night I received his letter, and Clement, poor dear boy, remains unavenged. Murdered! Yes, murder, though he died by his own hand."

He clenched his hands in the stress of his emotion. Presently he recovered his calmness, and putting his hand in his breast pocket drew out a small thin leather wallet, from one of the divisions of which he took a letter. On the anniversary of his brother's death he never omitted reading this letter, which told him the writer had "gone the pace"—how he had become a criminal, and rather than bring disgrace upon his family had determined to take his life.

"You need not trouble to make enquiries about me," were the writer's final words. "The set I was mixed up with never knew me by my right name. I'm glad now they didn't. I dropped my real self when I went mad over the girl. My death ends *that* folly."

Since then Maurice Bradley had become the vicar of Lanchester, and as such, he had received a pressing invitation from the earl and the countess to look

in at the Christmas Eve revelries to be held at Lanchester Court. Bradley had never seen either his patron or the lady. When he was appointed they were abroad and had now only arrived in England.

The vicar walked slowly down the centre aisle, and quitted the church, locking the door behind him as he had promised the clerk.

He reached the lych-gate. What wind there was had dropped and the snow was floating rather than falling. Suddenly he heard a sound which caused him to turn swiftly. He saw nothing.

He looked around and upwards. A gleam of light was fitfully streaming through the lancet-shaped window of the belfry,

"Careless," he muttered. "Many a church has been burnt at Christmas. The fires have been alight since yesterday morning; the woodwork's very old. It would burn like tinder. I shan't be easy in my mind if I don't see that all is safe."

So he retraced his steps, leaving the outer door of the church ajar. He saw fresh signs of forgetfulness in the unlocked belfry door, passed through the narrow opening and toiled up the winding staircase.

He entered the belfry. And then——?

CHAPTER II

WHILE THE BELLS WERE RINGING

Soft, melodious strains were floating through the brilliantly-lighted ballroom of Lanchester Court. A dance was commencing.

A group of men, gathered round a surpassingly handsome woman, separated, some to seek their partners, others to join in the dull ranks of the "wall flowers."

A good-looking, youngish man, dark, pallid, with

a somewhat effeminate mouth—the weakness of which, however, was concealed by a heavy moustache—approached the lady. There was undisguised admiration in his eyes. He was very tall, and he inclined his head until his moustache almost touched her cheek.

"The last dance before supper is mine, Lady Lanchester," said he, in a low caressing voice. "I have come to claim my own."

"Suppose I assert my woman's privilege, and change my mind?" said she, with a sudden upraising of the dark eyelashes.

"You wouldn't be so cruel," he urged.

"Why not? Don't you know that women love to torture those they love?"

Lord Balmaine drew a long breath. He had come to Lanchester Court that Christmas Eve prepared to be bored. Instead, he had been plunged into a delicious dream. He had met Lady Lanchester. He had fallen desperately in love with her.

And he was not alone. There was not a man in the room who did not realise the witchery of her eyes, who did not at once yield to the spell of her voice, to the indescribable charm of her smile.

To-night she was one blaze of diamonds. All the Lanchester heirlooms had the Earl of Lanchester showered upon the newly-made countess, to say nothing of modern gems, of which he was never tired of giving his wife, and which she was never tired of receiving. She had a passion for diamonds.

The earl was sixty, and for the last ten years had lived abroad, his only interest in his estates being the collection of rents. His steward managed everything, and he fulfilled his duty to his tenants by spending their money.

Suddenly came the news that he had married—in Paris. No one knew anything about the lady, and he never troubled to give his friends any information.

The next surprise was the announcement that the earl was coming to England with his wife, and meant to spend Christmas in his ancestral home which he had not visited for over a decade.

So the ballroom, with its dark panels, its quaint carving, its timbered roof, its trophies of armour and old weapons, was decorated with holly and mistletoe, and a huge Yule-log crackled and flickered in the big grate.

Fever was in the veins of Lord Balmaine, and when the crash of the final chord came he was flushed and almost panting, but she was as self-possessed as before, with perhaps an enhanced brilliancy in her eyes. He led her to the conservatory, and they sat down amid a little forest of palms.

The talk was broken. Lord Balmaine felt strangely embarrassed, he knew not why. The lady did nothing to assist him. She was sitting in a statuesque pose and really seemed quite indifferent to his presence. Suddenly his embarrassment was ended by a clanging outburst of bells. The church was so near that the vibrations could almost be felt. Lady Lanchester rose to her feet.

"Twenty minutes to twelve," said she. "I must go. The supper begins punctually at midnight. We celebrate the dawn of Christmas with punch—of the earl's own brewing. It's made according to an old recipe dating back goodness knows how long."

"In the time of William of Orange, perhaps. It's said William brought it over from Holland."

"I wish he'd kept it there. I hate the stuff. It never suits me, but I'm obliged to sacrifice myself to please the earl. I suppose that's a wife's duty."

"Pleasing a husband's gone out of fashion. May I take you in to supper?"

"No. I'll introduce you to a nice girl—very rich."

"I hate nice girls—they're awfully tame as a rule—and riches have no attraction for me."

"I think you're very fastidious, but to-night, please, you'll have to do as you're told."

"Anything *you* tell me, Lady Lanchester——"

"Very well, then, please, get me an ice. This warm moist air's suffocating."

Balmaine rose with alacrity to execute the lady's orders. When he returned Lady Lanchester had disappeared.

The banqueting-hall was a blaze of brilliancy. It was no old-fashioned Christmas supper that met the eyes of the guests, but a modern banquet, with everything that could tickle the palate.

The gay company had filed in, headed by Lord Lanchester, with the richest heiress in the county hanging on his arm, and Lady Lanchester should have brought up the rear of the procession.

Lord Balmaine glanced into the ballroom. The last three couples were nearing the door. Suddenly he saw Lady Lanchester cross the ante-chamber. Where she had sprung from he could not tell. She had come from a side of the apartment where there was no door. But this was of no consequence. He hastened to meet her.

She heard his footsteps, and turned. He started, struck by the change in her face since he had last seen her—scarcely ten minutes ago. If she was handsome then, she was surpassingly beautiful now. The creamy pallor of her cheeks had now taken a pink glow, her lips were of a vivid scarlet, her eyes had in them a gleam of the amethyst.

Balmaine's blood leaped in his veins. Never had he seen any woman so enticing, so diabolically beautiful as Lady Lanchester was at that moment. She had emphatically *la beauté de diable*.

She slid her jewelled hand inside his arm, and, with a glance from her eyes into his, whispered:

"How nice of you to wait for me! So awfully sorry to run away. But, you see, the hostess is not

always mistress of herself. My housekeeper wanted to consult me, and I had to go."

Soon the fun was fast and furious. Jest and laughter were mingled with the popping of champagne corks and the clatter of knives and forks.

No one was gayer than Lady Lanchester. Witty herself, she was the cause of wit in others, and her ringing laughter was infectious.

Meanwhile the clangour of the bells was increasing. At times their booming overpowered the talk and laughter and the rattle. It wanted but a couple of minutes of midnight. The earl for some little time had been ladling out the steaming punch from a huge bowl. Footmen and maids were handing round the glasses. It was an insidious drink to interpolate between draughts of champagne. But no one took heed of this.

The noise and merriment rose louder than ever. The countess whispered to her husband.

"You shouldn't have given me that horrid punch," said she reproachfully. "My head's spinning like a top."

"That was because you insisted upon having champagne, you silly goose. I warned you, didn't I, not to mix punch with any other drink?"

"Yes, but I thought you'd let me off the punch."

"What, on Christmas Eve? By Jove, it's the only drink that fits the season. You'll soon get better."

"Not unless I lie down. I'll slip away quietly; no one will notice I've gone. I'll come back, I promise you, dear."

"Very well, but if I don't see you in a quarter of an hour I shall come and look after you."

"Please don't. I shall be thinking every minute that I hear you and that'll do me more harm than good. Twenty minutes or so of perfect quietude will put me right. I know myself better than you do."

"Yes, but I shall miss you all the same."

"I know you will, darling. It's nice of you to worry yourself, but really there's no necessity. Don't let me spoil your enjoyment. I never saw you in better form. *Au revoir.*"

The countess was absent quite half-an-hour, and on returning she was the subject of a host of anxious enquiries. She answered a little languidly and for a time was subdued in manner, but she soon regained her vivacity and had bursts of merriment so unexpected and so causeless as almost bordered upon hysteria. The combination of champagne and punch had evidently left its effects behind.

A galop ecstatic, maddening, marked the end of the festivities. Then followed the adieus, congratulations, thanks. Balmaine's place was some ten miles distant. His motor was awaiting him. He was lucky in taking farewell of the countess amid the dimness of the great entrance hall where the lamps were dying down. Lady Lanchester's manner towards him was gracious. She extended her hand to the young nobleman. He bent over it and kissed it.

"I did not say you might do that," said she softly.

"I thought your eyes gave me permission," he answered audaciously.

Just the slightest ripple of a laugh, and the white shoulders quivered for an instant. Her eyes seemed almost to scintillate.

"We shall meet again," he whispered, "soon, I hope. I shall not forget to-night."

CHAPTER III

THE SIGN OF THE BROAD ARROW

WHILE the punch was going round in the banqueting hall of Lanchester Court, the bell-ringers of Lanchester Church were gathered about the fire in the

big club room of the Red Lion, noisily wishing each other a "Merry Christmas." They had had one mug of egg-flip apiece and out of respect to the vicar abstained from a repetition until he should appear. He had promised to look in upon their conviviality for a few minutes.

But he came not and they wondered why.

"Maybe he don't care to coom to a pub," ventured one.

"Whaat! Arter he give his word?" rejoined Gaffer Gorme, the oldest ringer of the party, indignantly, "I don't hold wi' everything he says—he do let out a bit o' straight talk on us all when he's so minded—but a promise wi' him's a promise."

"Aye—aye," went in a low murmur round the group.

All at once the stillness was broken by a clang—only one sharp, short impatient note.

"Dang it—did 'ee hear that?" exclaimed Joe Raggles in a hushed voice.

The solitary clang was that of the treble bell, the smallest of the peal, and there was not one in that room who did not know that the bell had been rung by an unpractised hand.

They looked uneasily at each other; every eye sought that of its neighbour and finally rested upon Gaffer Gorme for an explanation of the mystery.

The door opened a little way, and the bullet-shaped head of Peploe the landlord was thrust into the room.

"Be 'ee all here?" said he, in rather a scared voice.

"In course we be," returned Gaffer Gorme.

"Then who be a-ringing of the bells?"

"Bells," exclaimed Joe, "it were only one bell."

"Aye—only one," replied Peploe. "What du it mean?"

Gaffer Gorme was appealed to. He could not resist the weight of evidence.

"Didn't 'ee lock the door, Joe Raggles?" said he.

Joe Raggles shuffled his feet, and said he "s'posed" he hadn't.

"Then maybe you'll go an' du it!" replied Mr. Gorme severely.

Joe Raggles was loth to leave. There was a considerable quantity of egg-flip to dispose of, but Joe dared not disobey Gaffer Gorme, and he set out on his errand.

It was hardly a stone's throw from the Red Lion to the churchyard gate. Joe Raggles had scarcely laid his hand on the latch, when he heard behind him a "Hallo!" so imperious, and so close, he turned round with a start and almost a-tremble, expecting to see someone at his elbow.

But the person who had shouted was quite ten yards away. He was a mounted police patrol. A man was half-running, half-walking to keep up with the pace of the horse. They had turned sharp round from the London road, and the snow was so thick Joe had not heard their coming.

"Joe Raggles, bean't it?" said the constable, panting. "Have you seen a man in convict dress go through the village during the last five or ten minutes?"

"Convict dress! What be that loike?" drawled Joe.

"Short drab tunic, knickers, cap sort of Glengary shape—broad arrow over tunic and knickers!" put in the patrol sharply.

"No, sir. I'm certain sure I haven't."

"Blockheads like you never see anything that'll do you any good," growled the patrol irritably. "Look here, an escaped convict isn't far off, and if you could have told us where he is it would ha' been as good as a fi-pun note in your pocket. We traced him along this road till the snow came on. Then we lost his trail. Tell everybody you know, my lad, and let 'em

turn out if they want to earn that fiver. Look to the footprints. A broad arrow's on the sole of his boots."

Joe Raggles was overwhelmed. An escaped convict! It was a whole penny romance to him. And a five-pound note—he had never had such a thing in his possession. He was half inclined to go at once in search of the convict. But Gaffer Gorme must be obeyed, and in he went to the church, but half an hour before so brilliant, and now so dark.

The church door was unlocked, and Joe, with a creepy sensation, turned the big handle and entered the porch.

"I wish some o' t'other chaps had coom wi' me. I wish I hadn't heered about that theer convict. I wish——"

What was the use of wishing? He'd got to see what was amiss in the belfry; and holding up his stable lamp Joe stumbled up the worn, winding, narrow stairs.

A squat door was at the top, and this, with a quaking heart, he pushed open. He saw nothing. Pooh! what was there to be afraid of?

He went a step further. A half-choked cry of horror escaped him. He stood rigid, his eyes starting from his head, his body stiff and frozen with terror.

A man was lying on the floor face downward, one arm stretched out, a small, dark, shining patch close to the head. That dark patch Joe Raggles knew by instinct was blood.

At last Joe forced himself to draw near and look at the face. A glance was sufficient.

"Heaven save us all," he gasped. "It be the vicar!"

He bolted out of the church, raced along the churchyard path and ran his hardest in the direction the patrol and the village constable had taken.

Presently he saw a disc of light flashing here and

there in the road. The officers were searching for traces of footsteps.

"Hi Hi!" shouted Joe.

Joe told his story as they hastened to the church. The patrol did not take it seriously. He thought the young fellow had exaggerated. He dismounted and the three entered the porch. The constable flashed his bulls-eye round.

"Hallo," he exclaimed. "Something be amiss here."

He went up to the collection box. The lid had been forced and the contents taken.

"The parson hasn't done *that*, anyhow," snorted the patrol. "Didn't you notice that box when you were here before?" he went on, turning sharply upon Joe Raggles.

"It warn't done then, that I'll swear," was Joe's reply emphatically.

The patrol decided to divide his forces. Tim Moggs the constable was to search for traces of the fugitive outside the church, the patrol himself with Joe Raggles would ascend to the belfry.

Presently the two stood within the belfry, and the patrol directed his lantern upon the body and upon the crimson pool already half congealed.

This pool and some significant marks leading from it to the door were of greater interest to the officer than the body. He bent down and studied both. He rose. His face was very stern.

Within the crimson patch and on every footprint leading to the door was the sign of the broad arrow!

CHAPTER IV

THE FOOTPRINTS IN THE BLOOD

How came the vicar by his death?

This was the question which no one in Lanchester

could answer. The coroner enthroned himself in high state in the big club-room of the Red Lion; the jury, with much scraping of feet, settled themselves on benches at the side of the coroner's table.

Mr. Coroner Crashett had a much more solemn air than usual when, after writing something with a very noisy pen, he nodded to his officer, and that functionary whispered to a neatly-dressed, middle-aged gentleman, whom everyone knew as Dr. Thornton.

"You have, I believe, Dr. Thornton, made an examination of the body of the deceased?" asked the coroner.

"Yes, in conjunction with Dr. Yabsley. The deceased gentleman was an exceedingly healthy and vigorous man, and, as we anticipated, we found all the organs quite sound, and free from disease. But we also made a discovery. In the heart——"

The doctor paused, and the jury craned their heads forward. They seemed to know something sensational was coming.

"In the heart," repeated the doctor slowly, "we found this."

From a receptacle of wadding he produced a thin, needle-like piece of steel about five inches long, and pushed it across the table for the coroner's inspection.

"This steel dart was embedded in the heart, and was undoubtedly the cause of death. On examining the surface of the skin, we found a small puncture, made apparently by the dart when entering the body; but, without the knowledge of its cause, this puncture was so unimportant it certainly would have been overlooked."

"Can you form any idea how such an instrument came to be in the body of the deceased?"

"I have no opinion beyond the general theory that it was the result of a thrust. Had the dart been broken at the end, one would be justified in thinking it was a portion of a longer instrument, but you will

see that it is quite smooth, and well finished off at the blunt end. The mystery is how sufficient force was obtained to drive it completely into the body."

The coroner, having surveyed the murderous little bit of steel, passed it on to the jury, who bent their heads over it and whispered.

"The thing couldn't ha' been pushed in by the vicar himself?" hazarded the foreman deferentially. "I've heerd tell how a man in prison once got hold of a needle and committed sooicide by a-sticking it in his heart—just as you say, doctor."

"A needle a couple of inches long might be so thrust by a desperate madman, but not one of five inches. The vicar, as all of us can testify, was one of the sanest of men."

A murmur of assent arose.

"Could it have been the result of an accident?" asked the coroner.

"I cannot see any possibility of such a thing. Supposing the vicar had been seized with a sudden faintness, and had fallen upon this instrument, it could not have entered its entire length. One would have to imagine also that the needle was sticking up from a floor not of wood, but of brick. But this notion is entirely disposed of by the fact that the body was lying on its back inclining towards the left side. The needle entered from the front."

"Then," said the coroner, hesitatingly, "there is but one theory left."

"Yes. The instrument was thrust by the hand of some person with great force and deliberation, and with intent to kill."

"In other words, you think the deceased was murdered?"

"That is my opinion."

Dr. Yabsley, the head surgeon of Lanchester Infirmary, agreed with his colleague.

The cause of death from a physiological point of

view was pretty clear. It was absolutely certain that the case was not one of suicide. Who, then, gave the fatal blow? The coroner turned his attention to this point.

After Joe Raggles, the patrol and the constable had told their stories, Superintendent Foulsham reported the result of his investigations and what he had deduced from them. To begin with, unquestionably the footprints were made by a convict's shoes, and it was equally unquestionable that a convict had escaped from Dartmoor and had been traced to the neighbourhood of Lanchester. Most likely he would have been captured, but that the snow had concealed his trail. It could hardly be doubted that he had taken refuge in the church, and after watching the ringers leave he had ascended to the belfry.

The superintendent was of opinion that the vicar must have suspected something was amiss in the belfry, that he had gone thither and found the convict. Then the latter attacked him and fearing capture had taken his life.

Two objections could be advanced to this theory. One was that there were no signs of a struggle and the other that he had not been robbed. He was wearing his watch, and money was in his pocket.

But it did not follow from this that the convict was not the guilty man. After committing the murder his first thought would be to get away. Flight most certainly was uppermost in his mind. The rifling of the collection box was, probably, an impulse which could not be resisted and would be but the work of a minute.

Then the coroner addressed the jury, giving it as his opinion that while the facts as they stood pointed strongly to the probability that the convict was the perpetrator of the crime, there was not sufficient evidence to prove it. All that the jury could do

would be to consider whether the deceased had been murdered.

The verdict ran:

"Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown."

CHAPTER V

THE MYSTERIOUS PACKET

"YOU'RE confoundedly quiet to-day, Leonie. What's given you the hump?"

Thus the Earl of Lanchester. He and the countess were in the drawing-room of their town house in Park Lane. A fortnight had gone by since Christmas. It was the hour before dinner. The countess had driven in the Row, as usual; she had returned, dressed, and was now reclining languidly on a crimson velvet settee, a beautiful picture of grace and indolence. If her part in the world was to look handsome and be admired, she played it to perfection.

The fire was throwing out a scorching heat, and her ladyship held a hand-screen, with which she shielded her face from the blaze, and protected her delicate complexion. On her firm, rounded arm, sparkled a costly diamond bracelet.

Lord Lanchester was lounging behind the settee, his arm resting on the back, his baggy, wicked old lobster eyes feasting on the charms of his beautiful wife.

"Oh, I can't always be up to concert pitch," she rejoined, moving the screen till more in front of her face.

"By gad, Leonie, whether you're quiet or lively, you're the prettiest woman in the world."

His lordship emphasised his words by suddenly bending his head and kissing the countess's plump shoulder. Either the unexpected contact of his lips,

or the brushing of her skin by the harsh hairs of the earl's grizzled moustache, startled her. She seemed to recoil from his touch, and a curious little cry, immediately suppressed, escaped her lips.

The earl continued to ramble on, and in the midst of his talk came the sound of the dinner-gong.

He at once rose, and offered his arm to Lady Lanchester.

"Go down without me, Marmaduke," said she. "I must speak to Adele first. I will follow you in half a minute."

His lordship obeyed, sauntering down the staircase stroking his grey moustache, and wondering what had put Leonie out. Meanwhile, her ladyship ran to her own suite of rooms, which she insisted upon having when her husband first brought her to the stately Park Lane mansion. These rooms she had fitted up and decorated according to her own fancy, and she laughingly forbade the earl entering them save at her request.

The entrance to these "diggings" opened into a little lobby. The outer door had a spring bell attached, so that no one could enter without their approach being signalled. Then there was the lobby to cross, and afterwards came the door leading into a suite of rooms on the furniture and decoration of which a fortune had been lavished.

Adele, her ladyship's French maid, was in one of the further rooms when she heard the sharp, authoritative ting of the signalling bell. She came, a pure Parisienne, with her little beady eyes, her pallid face, her trim figure, and her beautifully arranged hair, running to her mistress.

"Any letters—any telegrams?" was the question imperiously—even feverishly—asked.

"One vire, madame. It is but this instant arrive."

Lady Lanchester tore open the buff cover impatiently. Her eyes suddenly flashed; her bosom

rose once and fell. One deep breath escaped her, with the sound of a sigh of relief. This was what she read:

"I am expecting you to-night. Pray do not disappoint me."

Lady Lanchester crumpled up the paper, threw it in the fire, and glanced at her reflection in the mirror.

"How do I look, Adele?"

"Madame is charming. Milord Balmaine—ah, how he vill you admire!"

Madame was not absolutely satisfied with the girl's opinion, and she gazed at herself calmly and critically.

"Adele is right," she thought.

They were seated after a *tête-à-tête* dinner, in the White Drawing-room, a charming apartment decorated in white and gold, with Empire furniture of the same.

The earl was sipping coffee and curaçoa, and was chuckling at some witty story which the countess told with infinite vivacity. He liked to be amused, especially if there was a spice of wickedness in the amusement.

"What strange, uncertain creatures you women are!" he exclaimed. "A couple of hours ago you were in the bottomless pit of gloom, and now you are as lively as a kitten."

"You silly old boy! You wouldn't have me always the same?" said the countess, patting his cheek softly.

"Damme, I'd tire of you in an hour. By the way, have you seen that fop Balmaine since you left Lanchester?"

"Lord Balmaine? Wasn't he that horrid, effeminate young man who took me into supper on Christmas Eve?"

The earl looked relieved, and imprisoned the hand that had been withdrawn from his face.

"Yes. You don't care for him?"

"Care for him? What absurd things you say! I doubt whether I should know the man if I saw him."

Her left arm went round his neck, and she drew his head towards her. At the same moment her right hand, which was holding a tiny vinaigrette, hovered over the earl's cup of coffee. A little deft manipulation of the neck of the vinaigrette, the spring connected with the stopper was released, and the contents of the bottle fell into the cup.

It was clear the countess's objection to Lord Balmaine was very pleasing to the earl. He kissed her with quite the ardour of a young man, and then, at her tender remonstrance, that he was allowing his coffee to get cold, drained his cup.

Within five minutes he grew fearfully drowsy, nay, more than drowsy. One would have said that his lordship had been drinking heavily.

He leaned heavily on the countess, and she endured the weight for some little time, until he began to snore. Then, with a gesture of disgust, she pushed him away, rose, and rang the bell sharply. A servant appeared.

"Send Lampiter, at once."

Lampiter was my lord's man, a most discreet servitor.

"Help his lordship to bed," was the lady's cold, haughty command.

She swept out of the room, and hastened to her own suite.

"My cloak, Adele!" she cried, with feverish haste.

The deft waiting maid was instantly on the alert. In a few seconds the countess was robed. She had promised to meet Balmaine at the opera. She was in her most fascinating mood, and the excitement put a faint glow on her cheeks they did not often wear.

Her ladyship did not leave the house by the main

staircase. These " diggings " of hers had a private staircase communicating with a side street. She sped down the stairs, and once in Park Lane, hailed the first empty taxi she saw.

The taxi drew up to the pavement. A man suddenly glided from somewhere out of the darkness, and ran to open the door. He did not look like a tramp. The countess turned towards him. Their eyes met. He whispered something, and thrust a packet into her hand. Then he wheeled round, and vanished.

Lady Lanchester stood motionless for a few seconds. The taxi-driver looked round, not feeling the vehicle move with the weight of his fare on the step. He had begun to think that he had been called on a fool's errand, and that the lady had altered her mind.

" Where to, ma'am?" he inquired.

" Where to?" she repeated, mechanically. " Oh—" she paused, " Victoria Station."

She entered the taxi, closed the door after her, and sank upon the seat like one from whom all strength had departed. She was clasping tightly the object the man had thrust into her hand.

Victoria was the terminus of the line that went to Lanchester. Perhaps that was why it came into her head. By the time the taxi had arrived at the station, the countess had made up her mind.

Within half-an-hour she was seated in a first-class compartment. She wanted no fellow travellers, and a tip of half-a-crown to the guard made her safe in that respect.

Something was troubling her. Now and again she tapped her white teeth with her gloved hands; then she passed her fingers over her forehead, and frowned till the dark brows almost met.

Arrived at Lanchester, she pulled up the high collar of her fur-lined cloak, alighted from the carriage, and hastened along the platform. She had

taken a return ticket, and, as she hurried through the station, she paused for a moment to look at the time-table. It was then a quarter past ten, and there was a train back to town at midnight.

"If I am lucky, I shall have time," she muttered.

Ten minutes' walk to Lanchester church, half an hour to perform her task, and ten minutes for the journey back. Why, she would have three-quarters of an hour to spare.

She sped along the dark lanes, not meeting a soul. Soon the tower of the church showed itself, square and uncompromising, and she stole into the churchyard.

Suddenly she came upon a newly-made grave. The mould had been loosely piled upon it, and the turf had not yet been placed in position. It was the grave of the murdered Maurice Bradley. Her ladyship stood for a few moments, staring at the black heap.

"I must have a shovel of some kind. I can't dig with my fingers," she muttered.

She cast a rapid glance around, saw close to the churchyard wall a squat little brick building, doubtless the sexton's toolhouse, and, with the packet in her hand, threaded her way towards it.

The next minute she was in possession of a mattock, and was back at the grave, digging with decision, with method, like one accustomed to its use.

Had she not been so intent upon her work, she might have seen a gaunt, wolf-like face, with wild, staring, hungry eyes, peering at her from behind a near-by tombstone.

The task she had set herself was finished. She dug a hole about a foot deep, dropped the packet given her by the strange man within it, and carefully replaced the soil, arranging and smoothing the surface with care, so that no one should suspect it had been disturbed.

"At last!" she murmured. "It will rest well there until the time comes to unearth it! Yes, it will be as sacred as the body of Maurice Bradley himself!"

CHAPTER VI

A MAD PASSION

"I SHALL not want you any more to-night, Adele."

The countess drew off her long, white gloves, and, unfastening the diamond clasp of her silk-lined cloak, threw it back, and her white, gleaming shoulders stood out in their beautiful curves against the crimson.

She was in high spirits, and the flush on her cheeks added to her beauty. She felt she had been irresistible, and, had she chosen to lead him on, Lord Balmaine would have made a complete fool of himself over her. But the time for his conquest had not yet come.

They had dined together that evening. At first he had been inclined to be angry over his disappointment of a night or two ago, when, instead of meeting him at the Opera, she had paid that flying visit to Lanchester; but she laughed and teased him into a good humour.

The earl knew nothing about this little dinner with Balmaine, at the Empress Hotel. He had not been well for the last two or three days. An unaccountable drowsiness had oppressed him; but he put it down to liver, never dreaming he had been drugged.

The countess's solicitude for her husband was admirable. She was all that a tender and affectionate wife should be. She suggested a week or two's rest at Lanchester Court, away from the din and clatter of London. The earl thought the idea was excellent, if she would but accompany him.

"Of course, you silly old thing!" said she, kissing his grey eyebrows. "What would you do without me?"

Notwithstanding all this demonstration of wifely affection, she enjoyed her dinner and *tête-à-tête* with Lord Balmaine exceedingly. Ever since she had noticed the magnificent diamond ring the nobleman wore she had coveted it, and that night's dinner ended in her wheedling the jewel out of him.

It was so easy. First she admired the stone. Then she wanted to see how much smaller her own finger was than Balmaine's. She laid her white, jewelled hand on his, and the foolish young nobleman felt a strange, intoxicating sense of pleasure. The next moment the ring was transferred.

"I never saw it sparkle on my hand as it does on yours, Leonie!" cried the enamoured youth. "I believe you're a witch!"

She laughed that low, dangerous, seductive ripple of hers, and allowed him to kiss the finger on which flashed the gem. Never had she seen a stone of such pure colour—a cold, dazzling stream of white light, with now and again a tinge of rose, according to the movement.

"Dearest countess, that ring on your finger gives me the right and privilege to kiss your hand!" he whispered thickly, as if in justification of his boldness.

"Then I will wear it when with you, Aubrey, if you will let me," she said, with a triumphant gleam in her mystical eyes.

It was the first time she had called him by his Christian name, and he flushed with delight.

"I shall have to get the ring cut and made smaller," said she, suddenly. "Now, remember, I shall always wear it when with you, but never at any other time. I regard it as sacred. No other eyes but yours and mine shall ever rest upon it."

Then all at once—he scarcely knew how it came about—his bliss was at an end, and he was putting her cloak about her, and being permitted—exquisite task!—to fasten the clasp.

And so she returned to Park Lane in the highest spirits.

The maid dismissed, she threw herself on the satin upholstered settee, in front of the blazing fire, a charming picture of alluring beauty and indolent languor.

She turned the ring on her finger round and round, and laughed to herself.

"It's a talisman. With this, I can persuade that silly fool to do what I please. I have never seen so beautiful a stone. I wonder what its value is?"

She stretched her round, lithe form along the settee, basking in the glow of the fire like some beautiful wild animal. The ruddy flames threw its rosy tinge on her face and shoulders, and she smiled to herself in a mirror in the centre of a screen just on a level with her eyes.

"Yes, I look well to-night. Poor Balmaine! How I must have tantalised him. Well, so much the better. The more I keep him at a distance, the more likely he is to hand out money when I want it. And maybe that time isn't very far off."

The ormolu clock struck the hour of midnight, with a sharp, shrill, impatient note.

Gradually her expression changed. Her face became clouded; the eyes lustreless; the corners of the mouth depressed. She sat for some five minutes motionless, her eyes staring vacantly at the fire.

Suddenly she started. A soft tap was heard at the door. The countess recovered her self-possession. She knew the sound. It was Adele's knock. The maid came in, her eyes more sparkling than usual.

"Lampeeter 'ave a message for madame. Milord 'ave come 'ome. He ask for Madame."

Lady Lanchester rose and went to her mirror. She

had gone a little pallid. She dabbed her cheeks with the slightest tinge of colour. She descended to the earl's smoking snuggery. She knew she would find him there.

She went up to him, and putting her hands on his shoulders, held up her face to be kissed.

A settee that was just big enough for two was in front of the fire. The earl sat down and drew his wife upon his knee. She put her arm round his neck and smoothed his grizzled hair. He allowed her to fondle him without saying a word.

"What's the matter, dear?" she whispered. "Anything gone wrong?"

"No. I only had a couple of games. The thing that didn't help me to-night was that some of the men would persist in pestering me with questions about our dead vicar. That tiresome bore, old Foljambe, wanted to know what *I'd* done in the matter? Talked a lot of rot about the Home Office having abolished offering rewards for wanted murderers, but that there wasn't anything to prevent a private person doing so. He didn't say so outright, of course, but it was a pretty broad hint that I ought to do something of the kind. Dashed impertinent, wasn't it?"

"Decidedly impertinent. All the same, there was something in the suggestion. It would make you popular at Lanchester and round about. Why don't you offer a reward of £500 for the discovery of the murderer? I suppose the police are not yet on his track?"

"Oh, they've got a clue, they say—but that's according to rule. They always have. It's a wonder they don't add that at any moment he may be captured. But £500—it's a tall order."

"I know—I know," retorted the countess, tapping the floor impatiently with the foot that was dangling. "But I'd like you to consider the matter from another point of view—it concerns me."

"Anything that concerns yourself, Leonie, is my first consideration. You know that, don't you?"

"Why, yes, dear, and that's what induces me to say what I'm about to say. The honest truth is that I want your friends at Lanchester to think well of me. They were awfully civil and all that, but I could see very well they regard me as a red-hot cinder—safe only when I was between the tongs. Do you understand?"

The earl laughed. The lady's little outbursts always amused him. He patted her cheek.

"Very well. It occurs to me that if you were to make out that this reward was *my* idea—that the man's terrible end has affected me very much—which it has—it would do both you and me good."

"I see. Well, I'll think over it."

"No—you must say 'yes.'"

She nestled to him like a playful kitten. Her soft adoration, her coaxing, could not be resisted. He gave his consent.

CHAPTER VII

AS SLIPPERY AS AN EEL.

THE efforts of the police to solve the mystery of the belfry followed the usual course. They proceeded on the most approved, up-to-date methods. They "reconstructed" the crime. It was plain as a pikestaff. The fugitive had taken shelter in the church; the vicar had heard his footsteps on the belfry stairs, had followed him, there was a struggle in the belfry, ending in the murder. Before the fellow had time to make his escape, Joe Raggles must have arrived on the scene and the murderer hid himself in the bell chamber above. Directly Joe fled for assistance, the man saw his chance, he came from his hiding place, went to the body to plunder it, altered his mind, think-

ing probably he had not sufficient time, ran down the stairs, caught sight of the collection box, broke it open, and made off with the contents.

A group of townsfolk were gathered round the little police station, just off Lanchester High Street. They were very much interested in the proceedings of a constable, who was pasting up a bill on the notice-board outside the station.

When he had moved away, and the heading of the bill,

"MURDER! £500 REWARD!"

could be seen, interest became excitement.

The five hundred pounds were offered for the capture of Max Barnard, a convict, who had escaped from Dartmoor Prison, and was wanted on a warrant charging him with having murdered the Rev. Maurice Bradley, vicar of Lanchester, in the belfry of the parish church, on the night of the 24th December.

It had already been whispered that the earl and countess contemplated offering a reward, the chief constable having received a notification to that effect, but how much was not known, and when the figures on the poster were seen, the magnificence of the sum took away the breath of the spectators. They were loud in their admiration of the liberality and public spirit of the nobleman and his lady.

Joe Raggles, the youthful bell-ringer, who had discovered the body of the vicar in the belfry, was among the little group who stared open-mouthed, while one of their number spelt through the placard.

"Well, I'm danged!" muttered Joe, scratching his head. "Blest if I wasn't nigh to earning that theer five hunderd pun on Christmas Eve. That convict must ha' passed purty close to me just afore I finds poor parson a-lying stone dead. That five hundred quid 'ud just about do me. S'posing I was to have a look round that there belfry?"

The church was open. It always was on Thursday.

The organist had a pupil who came that day, and the great organ pipes were booming forth drowsy sounds when Joe Raggles entered.

The setting sun filtered in through the narrow, slit-like windows of the belfry, and pretty well every corner was lighted. Joe searched about, but found nothing save dust. But there was the bell-loft yet to be explored. Joe had no sooner opened the door than the most extraordinary thing happened. As he described it afterwards, a sledge-hammer seemed to come out from the darkness, strike him on the face, and stretch him backwards on the floor, senseless.

A man in a ragged ulster over his convict dress, gaunt and attenuated, hollow-cheeked and hungry-eyed, stepped noiselessly from the recess where the ladder was fixed, and rapidly passed his long, well-shaped fingers over Joe's body.

In a couple of seconds, all the money in Joe's pockets was transferred to the solitary pocket which the convict possessed. In twenty seconds more, Joe's long overcoat was dexterously slipped off. Then followed his boots, his football cap. His trousers might have succeeded, and even his shirt, but that he began to show signs of returning consciousness.

"Curse you, you silly fool!" muttered the convict. "I've a mind to—no. I won't swing for such a miserable rat. After all, you've done me a good turn. I must have come out some time or starved, and now's my chance of a quick change."

All this while he was rapidly putting on Joe's coat, boots, and cap. His own tunic, his squat prison cap, and his prison boots, with the tell-tale broad arrow indented deeply in the soles, he rolled into a bundle, and tied them round with the blue prison handkerchief. This bundle he concealed under his coat.

Then he softly crept down the belfry stairs, and stole from the church as the organ pealed forth a triumphant march.

The sun had almost disappeared, patches of fiery red showing here and there between the pines and the wide-spreading yews. A white mist was gathering.

The convict crept under one of the yew trees. His figure was quite invisible. He hesitated what to do. It was scarcely dark enough for him to venture abroad, but he had no alternative. The man he had left unconscious was bound soon to recover and would give the alarm.

He was still under the sombre yew tree, waiting for the darkness when he heard the church door close. Three men came out. The centre man was without his overcoat, and was bootless. A handkerchief was tied over his head in lieu of a cap. The other two—the organist and his pupil—supported him.

The fugitive smiled grimly as they walked by. The sight was a warning to him. The man he had struck down, and whose coat, boots and hat he was now wearing, would give the alarm, and the churchyard was bound to be searched.

He stole away, and, scaling a low wall, struck out for the open country. He knew nothing about Lanchester or its surroundings, and after crossing a dreary common, he came to a road upon which there was apparently a fair amount of traffic. It was far too public for his taste, and, noticing a high wall running parallel to the road, apparently bordering a wood or park, he turned from the footpath, and, after throwing his bundle of clothes over the wall, followed himself.

All at once he came upon a hollow where the drainage had formed a pond of considerable size. It was so sheltered that there was but a thin coating of ice. Here was a chance of getting rid of the convict clothes too good to be missed. He filled the tunic pocket and the convict boots and cap with stones, wrapped the tunic round the other articles, secured

the whole with rushes, and hurled the bundle as far as he could. It came down with a crash and a splash, and disappeared.

"I guess I'll find a way of getting rid of these cursed knickers," he muttered.

Another long tramp through bracken and bramble, and he came to the wall on the opposite side of the park. Climbing the wall, he found himself again in a road, but this time an unfrequented one.

He reached a roadside inn. He appeased his hunger in the tap-room. There were two or three labourers sitting in the chimney-corners, smoking and drinking, but they took no notice of him, beyond a "Good evenin'!" when he entered.

He left the inn, not because he had absolutely satisfied his hunger, but that he thought he might attract attention, and because he was anxious to push on. Once in London, he would soon be swallowed up in the endless labyrinth of streets and alleys and courts, all teeming with people who had to work too hard to mind other persons' business. It was so easy, too, to buy clothes in Petticoat Lane, where things were cheap, and no questions asked.

He came to a crossway, and while debating which way to go, heard the sound of a railway whistle. The thought seized him—why not go to London by train? It was risky, but the luck was with him to-night, and he believed in following his luck. He turned in the direction from which the sounds came, and soon a bend in the road brought the lights of the station into view. He ran, for he did not know whether the train slowing was on the up or down line.

Breathless he arrived at the station. He was too late. He peeped into the booking-office, and saw a lady in front of a time-table.

She lifted her veil, and, having satisfied herself, lowered the veil, turned and glanced towards the door. He drew back, and slunk into the shadow. She came

out, never saw him, and walked briskly along the road. He followed.

Without knowing it, he had in his tramp from the park doubled back, and had come to Lanchester railway station. He could not explain why he pursued the lady like her shadow. He had not seen her face, but something in her figure and about her carriage attracted him. When she entered the churchyard, as she did, he climbed over the wall and dogged her. He was behind a gravestone when she dug the hole in the grave of the murdered vicar.

He followed her back to the station, but he could do no more. There was no train for half-an-hour, and it would not be safe to remain, so he turned away, and tramped along a bye-road until he came to where three ways met. Here was a signpost. It had been newly painted, and stood out fairly distinctly, despite the gloom.

The words were either difficult to read, or the convict was short-sighted. Anyway, he stared at the three arms for a minute or so, before deciding which road to take.

He was so absorbed, he did not hear a stealthy tread behind him. Suddenly a heavy hand descended upon his shoulder, and he heard a voice say:

"You're my prisoner."

In a flash he wheeled round, saw a policeman's helmet and a youthful face beneath it—the face, in fact, of Tim Moggs—and out shot an iron fist. Tim went head-over-heels into a ditch, and the convict vanished in the darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

HER HUSBAND'S VOICE

For some few days the earl continued to be out of sorts. Nothing very much was the matter, but he

fancied there was, and with a dyspeptic this is the same thing. Probably a reminiscence of the drug so deftly administered by her ladyship, was hanging about him, but he did not know this.

His lordship was what the countess called "ratty," and it was as much as she could do to keep her temper. Women, no doubt, can be "ministering angels," if need be, but a dyspeptic, cantankerous, elderly gentleman is a great strain upon the most angelic of women. The earl would have sent for his physician, Sir Owen Standish, but the countess laughed him out of the notion, and persuaded him to lunch at his club. She even went so far as to say that two people constantly together were bound to get on each other's nerves. His lordship would not admit this, but secretly he thought with her.

She also pleaded that she had a little shopping to do in the afternoon, and was dying to hear Kreisler in the evening. This was enough. The earl hated music, especially classical music, and he loathed fiddlers. But he had a sense of justice. Leonie had really been most devoted during his indisposition, and it was agreed that for this evening they should go "on their own."

She carried out her programme. When she returned from her shopping expedition she questioned Lampiter as to his master's movements, and learned that the earl had come in during the afternoon, had dozed in his smoking room for an hour, had written some letters, and had had a visitor—a gentleman.

"Anybody that you know, Lampiter?"

"No, madame. Quite a stranger."

She dined, she dressed herself carefully, she went to the concert, but not alone; Lord Balmaine was her companion. His raptures over Kreisler rather bored her, but she pretended to share his enthusiasm. He was delighted, and more in love with her than ever.

"We'll have supper at the Ritz. What do you say?" said he, when the concert was over.

"I should love it, but—" she sighed, "it can't be done. I told the earl where I was going. He knows that concerts aren't late."

"Where, then? I'm dying to have a long chat. I miss you more and more every day, Leonie."

"You silly boy. One would think it was a novelty to be in love."

"So it is—with you, Leonie. You drive me mad."

Her laugh, and the alluring red lips, set him longing to kiss them. He had to be contented with squeezing her hand. It was a disappointment not to be able to ride with her home in his car, but her own motor was awaiting her, and it was not to be thought of. They parted, and she promised to write him.

"You haven't once noticed that I'm wearing your ring," she whispered, reproachfully, as he bent over her hand.

"Indeed I have. You're an angel."

The countess arrived at Park Lane somewhat subdued. She was looking forward to a testy outburst from her husband. But he had not come home, and she went to her rooms feeling pretty certain he would not trouble her that night.

It was of vital importance he should not.

She sent Adele to bed, and sat in one of her favourite attitudes, clasping her knees, and gazing into the fire. It was then about eleven o'clock. Midnight came, and she had not changed her attitude.

Suddenly an electric bell in the lobby outside, leading to the private staircase which she alone used, sounded.

Snatching up an electric torch, she opened the door, darted across the lobby to the outer entrance, and rapidly descended the staircase.

"Yes?" said she, in a penetrating whisper, with

her fingers on the handle of the door, hesitating to open the latter until she was sure of her visitor.

"The Roc," came back, in low tones.

With feverish fingers, she unlocked the door. A man, tall, well-built, somewhat square-shouldered, was standing outside.

He entered, and the countess closed the door noiselessly. Then she turned, and flung her arms about his neck, and almost forcibly drew his face towards hers, so that she might kiss him.

"Alec," she breathed passionately, between her kisses, "oh, I've so longed to see you!"

They reached the boudoir. The man—Alec Helston by name—threw his slouched hat on the table, and his glittering, hawk-like eyes went round the room in a flash. A handsome man of a certain type, with his aquiline nose, prominent, square chin, and thick raven hair, straight and sleek.

"A jolly comfortable billet you've got here, Leonie—hang me if you haven't! I always said you were dashed lucky."

"So much the better for you, dear boy," she laughed.

"Not so sure about that. There's no telling what cursedly unlucky mess you'll land me in," he returned, hastily. "Anyhow, tell me, where have you hidden the Thing. You wrote to me it was in a perfectly safe place, but you didn't say where."

"Not likely. Do you suppose I should be such a fool as to put a secret into black and white? Oh, it's very snug, and in a spot where no one will think of looking for it."

"Look here, Leonie; for the present, you must keep quiet. Don't go flaunting about at theatres. At any moment you might be recognised."

"It would be the merest chance in the world that would bring us face to face," she exclaimed, scornfully. "Every policeman has Max Barnard's photo-

graph and his description. He's bound to be captured. Do you know what I've done?"

"Something dashed clever, I'll bet my bottom dollar. What?"

"Offered £500 reward for his capture."

"By gad, that was smart."

He gave a chuckle.

"What's amusing you?"

"I'm wondering if you'd hand over the five hundred quid to me, if I ran him to earth?"

"That's for the police to decide. I guess you won't be too eager to tackle *those* gentlemen."

"If your little game failed, it would make it still more awkward for you, if he were to turn up and recognise Leonie Marras in the Countess of Lanchester," he growled. "What would you do?"

"Don't imagine I'm afraid, Alec!" she cried, defiantly, "I've escaped one danger, I can escape another."

"I'll bet you can. You're like a cat in more ways than one—you've got nine lives, that I'll swear. In the meantime, where's the Thing? You haven't told me."

"No, and I don't mean to—yet!" she rejoined.

He started from his chair in a boiling rage.

"Is this a trick, Leonie?" he hissed. "Are you playing to get it in your possession? By Heaven, I believe you are. I know there's one thing you can never resist—a thing you'd sell your soul for—for which you would even sacrifice me——"

"No, no, no!" she cried vehemently. "It is for your sake I am secret. I swear——"

He broke in fiercely upon her, with a torrent of oaths. He clutched her wrist, and would have shaken her as though she were a disobedient child. She burst into a torrent of passion.

"You brute!" she shrieked, "not another word. Out of my path!"

He had scarcely touched her when, in a white heat of fury, she slipped her wrists from his grasp, struck him across the face, and hurled him on one side as though he were a baby.

His foot slipped, and he crashed to the floor, striking his head against the clawed leg of a small ornamental table. He cut his forehead, and for a moment or two was stunned.

At the sight of his blood, her mad fury left her. She flung herself frantically by his side and raised his head, calling him all the endearing names she could think of, and upbraiding herself without measure.

"Am I hurt much?" he asked, in a faint voice.

"No, no. I don't think so. Don't move, I'll get some water and bandages," she replied, hurriedly.

She flew across the room towards the adjoining apartment, but stopped, pale as death, on reaching the doorway. The electric bell at the door communicating with the house rang sharply. It would not do to ignore the summons. She went into the lobby, and called out:

"Who's there?"

"It's I, Leonie."

"One moment, Marmaduke, and I'll open the door. Is anything the matter?"

"No, nothing much; but I must see you."

She flew back into the room. Helston had struggled to his feet, alarmed at the interruption.

"Quick—quick—the earl!" she whispered, frantically. "The other door! For Heaven's sake, make haste! I daren't keep him waiting. He'll suspect something."

CHAPTER IX

LORD BALMAINE'S RING

HELSTON was standing in the centre of the room, the blood still trickling down his cheek.

"Tell me where you've hidden the Thing, Leonie, and I'll go like a shot!"

She was mute, and bit her white lips to repress a burst of anger. Alec Helston, for whom she would have died, was using her for his own selfish advantage. But this was not the sting. The sting was in the fact that he wouldn't trust her.

The electric bell sounded again. Her husband was becoming impatient. Well, though delay might be fatal, she would test this dark, handsome, selfish man.

"And if I refuse, what then?"

"I don't go. I'm awfully fond of you, Leonie—but hang me if you're treating me properly! Look sharp! Don't keep your husband waiting. Whatever happens, you must hold him all right."

"Very well, if you must know," she panted. "It's in the grave of Maurice Bradley!"

He shrank back.

"There!" he muttered hoarsely. "Whatever induced you to——"

"Say no more. I've told you. Go!" she cried distractedly, and stamped her foot.

He shrugged his shoulders, turned on his heel, and strode towards the door leading to the private staircase.

The next moment she snatched up a silk dressing-gown—enveloped herself in it, and with a glance at the mirror to see that her face would not betray her, ran to the other door and unlocked it.

"I'm so sorry, dear!" she whispered, in a penitent tone. "I was just doing my hair. I hate you to see me in anything but my best. You'll forgive a woman's silly vanity, won't you?"

But the earl was not to be so easily pacified as she hoped and expected. He accepted her caress without returning it, and stalked into the room.

He threw himself on the satin couch whereon she had reclined but half an hour since, his shaggy brows

contracted, his face flushed, the deep lines in the forehead and at the sides of the nose prominent.

Leonie had not studied the moods of the earl for nothing. She knew perfectly well the signs of the coming storm. She sank by his side, put her arm round his neck and laid her head on his shoulder, with her cheek near his.

"How nice it is to have you with me!" she sighed. "You're so kind and good. I ought to be the happiest woman in the world. And to think that only a year ago I was the wretchedest! Dear Marmaduke, you have made me forget all my unhappy past!"

The earl fumbled in his pocket and drew out an ordinary address card. He put it into the countess's hand.

"Do you know that man?" said he, in a harsh voice.

"Peter Carew," was the name on the card.

She looked her husband straight in the eyes.

"No. Who is he?"

"We'll come to that presently. Do I understand you to give me your word of honour that this man is a perfect stranger to you?"

The countess drew herself up, with a superb assumption of scorn.

"I'm sorry, Marmaduke, you've so little faith in me that you can't take my word without the necessity of putting me on my honour. But as it seems your mood to-night is to slight—nay, almost to insult—me I won't thwart it. Upon my honour, Mr. Peter Carew, whoever he may be, is utterly unknown to me. Good-night."

She turned away abruptly and was walking towards the bedroom when the earl hastened after her.

"Don't talk nonsense, Leonie!" said he, putting his arm round her waist. "You mustn't misunderstand me. I felt convinced this fellow was blundering horribly, and had I been quite sure I would have

kicked him out of the place. He called here this afternoon, while you were out, and introduced himself as the junior partner of a big firm of diamond merchants in Hatton Garden. He wanted, at first, to see you, and when I said you were out he refused to disclose his business to me. He hinted that it was of a disagreeable and even painful nature; but when I challenged him to tell me what it was he evaded the point. However, I pressed him, and then he said that he must know whether you were the same woman—the cad called you a 'woman!'—with whom his firm had done business years ago. All depended upon that. If you were not, the matter would drop. If you were, the consequences might be very serious!"

"This is an outrage!" cried the countess, with blazing cheeks. "I'm amazed you should have listened to so much implied slander! I shall call upon this scoundrel."

"Yes, and I'll go with you."

"No, no! It would be making far too much of a trifle. You mustn't be worried. You've not been over-well the last three days, and I want to get you quite right. We'll go to Lanchester, and then to some warm place abroad—Naples, Palermo, Cairo—anywhere you like."

Such wifely solicitude deeply impressed the nobleman. He kissed her, and was about to accompany her from the room, when his glance rested on Lord Balmaine's diamond ring. It was lying on the table. He took it up before she could prevent it.

"What ring is this? I haven't seen it before."

"Oh," she said carelessly, "that's a relic of the wretched Monte Carlo days. A man gave me his ring one night when he won £20,000 by following my luck."

He turned the ring over, evidently not altogether pleased.

"Humph! Whose crest?"

Leonie could have bit her lips through and through with vexation.

"How should I know? I made a point of never asking the names of the persons who engaged me. Nor did they know my name. I always wore a mask, you know."

Of course, the earl was quite aware of the part which Leonie played at Monte Carlo. That did not matter to him. What she did as Countess of Lanchester was a different thing.

"I don't like you wearing jewellery given you by other men," said he brusquely. "I wish you'd let me have it. I'll buy you another worth more than this."

"My dear old bear, how you talk. What can be easier than to let me buy another ring more valuable than that and ask the jeweller to allow me what he could for the old one."

The earl drew himself up with hauteur.

"And turn yourself into a huckster. The very idea is humiliating."

"Not more humiliating than the idea you have of me, my lord," she retorted with a haughtiness equal to his own.

"The fault is yours, Leonie," he rejoined, rather taken back by her defiance.

"What fault?"

"Your—your deception. You evidently prize the ring highly—I presume on account of the giver—I've a right to resent *that*."

"I deny it. I've never sought to pry into your life before you married me. You've no right to pry into mine. I've told you how I became possessed of the ring. I'll go further—I care neither for the ring nor the man who gave it me. What about *this*?"

The countess had worked herself into a white heat

of passion. Her eyes were blazing, her lips drawn into two thin, pallid lines tight over her strong even teeth. A spot of colour was on either side of her face close to the cheek bones. Her nostrils quivered.

Snatching up the ring, Leonie hurled the trinket into the fire. At least this apparently was her intention, but her aim was bad; it struck the hearth and rebounded on to the rug. Before she could throw it a second time the earl had seized her arm.

"Gad! Have you taken leave of your senses, Leonie?"

"No, but your monstrous accusations are enough to send them flying."

"I've made no accusations."

"Not direct ones perhaps, but you've hinted at all sorts of things and that's worse. Don't forget, Marmaduke, that I'm not your slave—that I never was and that I never will be."

"You're exciting yourself without a cause, Leonie," said he, his voice a little tremulous. "Just think. You don't care for the ring, you say, and because I suggest taking the trouble of getting it off your hands, you fly into a tantrum. Pray don't let us quarrel over such a silly matter."

She sank on the couch in an attitude of careless grace. All traces of her passion had gone. Her dressing gown had fallen back and the creamy duskiness of her shoulders and her arms was in delightful harmony with the crimson lining of the robe. The lace edging of the collar was irresistibly feminine, and so also was the dainty foot and ankle.

To a man of the earl's age and temperament, beauty of bodily form is far more appealing than beauty of features. Leonie was perfect in both. The sight of her now, the sense that so much loveliness was his, overpowered anger and jealousy—at least for the moment. He leant over the back of the couch and kissed the mouth now no longer white and rigid, but

softened into a pout such as Greuze would have loved to paint.

He forgot everything. All he cared for then was reconciliation and caresses.

CHAPTER X

PETER CAREW HAS A VISITOR

VAN BUREN, Pintos and Carew were perhaps the biggest diamond merchants in Hatton Gardens. Their transactions were in millions, and nothing was too big for them to tackle.

Their offices consisted of a suite of three rooms on the first floor. The outer one was tenanted by a sharp, weazened-faced, diminutive-sized clerk, Peck by name. Next to the outer office was Peter Carew's room, and, further on, that of the head of the firm, Anthony van Buren. Each of these rooms, with the exception of the last-named, had doors leading into a passage.

In a safe in Anthony van Buren's room the firm kept their stock of diamonds, the value of which was not known outside the brains of Anthony van Buren and Peter Carew. As for Christopher Pintos, he was simply a big capitalist, who never troubled about the details of the business, and was quite content to draw a huge profit every year.

Peter Carew had brought no money into the concern, only brains. He was the junior partner, and his services were worth some thousands a year.

Just now he was walking up and down Anthony van Buren's room, his hands behind him, his head bent, buried in thought. The senior partner had gone home worried, unnerved, ill. The junior partner was in charge.

A terrible misfortune had overtaken the firm. A prospector in South Africa, while sampling ground

just outside the big diamond fields of Kimberley, came across one of the biggest stones the world had ever seen. It was so large that, if its quality were only equal to its size, no one but a man of fabulous wealth would be able to purchase it.

The prospector was glad enough to sell it in its rough, uncut state for £100,000 to a syndicate. The syndicate brought it to Amsterdam, where it was roughly fashioned, just sufficient to test the colour. Here Carew saw it, and on his report he first determined to become its purchaser.

Van Buren, Pintos, and Carew were in touch with opulent magnates all over the world, with princes of wealth, and even with Eastern potentates. They reckoned upon finding a customer who would give them £200,000 for the stone, and, therefore, when they paid the syndicate £125,000, they reckoned they had made a good bargain.

The cutting of the stone was completed, and the result was astounding. Never was a purer quality seen. It was worthy to rank with the great Russian diamond, the Pitt diamond, the Koh-i-noor, the Sanci diamond, the Hope diamond, the Star of South Africa, and other stones of the first rank.

A trusted messenger was despatched, with the stone in his charge, from Amsterdam. Van Buren & Co. were duly apprised by wire of his starting, and Carew went to Parkeston to meet him. The Amsterdam steamer arrived safely, but with no messenger.

Two days afterwards his body was washed ashore not far from Parkeston Quay, but no diamond was found upon him. The inference was that he had been robbed and murdered.

And this was the secret which was burdening the souls of Carew and van Buren; for no one besides themselves, save the head of the firm of diamond-cutters, knew the murdered man was in charge of the diamond.

The only conclusion the authorities could come to was that the jewel, like Gainsborough's celebrated picture of the Duchess of Devonshire, was hidden somewhere, and, since any attempt to dispose of so enormous a stone would inevitably lead to the unearthing of the robbers, some time must elapse before it would reach the market.

While Peter Carew was going over all the points, the door opened, and Peck ushered in a lady, closely veiled, neatly and quietly dressed and in admirable taste. Peter Carew bowed, and placed a chair for his visitor.

She acknowledged his politeness, seated herself, and, after waiting until Peck's retreating footsteps had quite died away, slowly raised her veil.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Carew, drawing a long breath, "Leonie Marras!"

For a man of the world, Peter Carew was decidedly flurried. He spoke as though he were half afraid of his visitor.

Meanwhile the lady sat perfectly composed. Nothing of the thoughts which were going on in her brain could be gathered from the expression of her face. She showed no emotion on his recognition of her, but waited for what he would say next.

But his brain was too confused to permit him to speak coherently.

"You're Leonie, that I'll swear," said he presently. "You've hardly altered a bit since last I saw you. I don't think there's another woman in the world like you, yet—I certainly saw a lady the other night at the opera who bore a very close resemblance. It led me into making a frightful blunder."

"Really?"

"Yes. I was so impressed that I jumped into a taxi and followed the lady's car. When it set her down at a Park Lane mansion, I hesitated about going

further. I felt convinced that you could not be the Countess of Lanchester."

"Oh, you found out who she was, did you?"

"Yes, there wasn't much difficulty after fixing where she lived. I couldn't afford to have any doubts, and I called at the house in Park Lane and asked to see Lady Lanchester. She was out, and the servant who took in my card told me that the earl would like to speak to me. I saw him and he was intensely angry."

"So I should think," said Leonie, shrugging her shoulders. "Well, what happened?"

"Nothing except that I left the house with a sort of sensation that I'd been kicked out. But don't let's talk any more on the subject. It's too unpleasant. Tell me—why have you come to see me?"

"For a very good reason. I am the Countess of Lanchester. Naturally, I want to know why you made such a fool of yourself and of me as well?"

"Then I *was* right. I don't know whether you expect an apology from me. If so, I offer one unreservedly to the Countess of Lanchester. But for Leonie Marras I've congratulations. When I remember the circumstances under which I saw you last I can do nothing else."

Suddenly he was cut short by an hysterical sob. Leonie was mopping her eyes with a tiny lace-bordered handkerchief.

"Good heavens, what have I said?" cried Carew. "I didn't mean you any harm by calling—indeed I didn't!"

"No harm, Peter? You couldn't have done me a greater injury! It was unkind—cruel. Granting you recognised me, why did you pursue me in a way which could not fail to cause unpleasantness between me and the earl? I thought once I had a true friend in you; I have never ceased to cherish the memory of what you did for me when I was poor, and in bitter

trouble; and—and—yes, I would have liked to renew those happy meetings so long as—I don't know what you must think of my confession—our friendship could be kept a secret. Oh, Peter, Peter, why did I love you so?"

Her whole frame was convulsed by the violence of her emotion. She wheeled round on the chair, and flung her arms straight out on the table, hiding her face between them—a pathetic picture of abandonment and despair.

Meanwhile, Peter Carew stood bewildered, almost trembling, thoroughly taken aback. It was true he had once been infatuated with Leonie Marras, but he thought he had conquered his passion. He was wrong.

CHAPTER XI

"YOU BETRAYED ME TO THE EARL—WHY?"

PETER CAREW'S acquaintance with Leonie was connected with an event which was, in its way, a tragedy.

Five years since a successful attempt was made to rob the firm. There were three in the plot, and the first thing the gang did was to get an introduction to the diamond merchants. Two or three small transactions followed, the gang sometimes acting as buyers, sometimes as sellers; and when they judged confidence was established they proceeded to their grand coup.

At that time Peter Carew was a kind of confidential clerk. He had not been admitted a partner of the firm.

Mr. Burrows was the partner in charge when two of the fellows called, introducing the third man, who they said wanted to buy some diamonds of a much larger size than they were able to supply. All three were exceedingly well dressed, and their appearance and manners were such as to throw any man off his guard.

Burrows, at all events, did not suspect anything. He consented willingly to show his stock, and had only just turned to unlock his safe when he was struck down senseless by a blow from behind. The safe was rifled, and the gang decamped, leaving the diamond merchant bleeding and unconscious.

It so happened that at the moment the three fellows were hurrying away, Peter Carew was turning into Hatton Garden from Holborn, and a few yards down Hatton Garden he met an exceedingly handsome young woman with whom he had a slight acquaintance, and, delighted at her unexpected appearance, he stopped to speak to her.

Peter Carew had first seen her at a public ball and was fascinated. She told him she was in the Alhambra ballet, and it seemed very possible, for she danced divinely.

She seemed as pleased with Carew as he was with her, and promised to meet him at the next "long hop" at the same rooms. She kept her word. They met afterwards at several of the dances, and the infatuated young man went crazy about her.

Then, just as he was on the eve of proposing marriage, she disappeared. She had promised to meet him and go to the theatre after a little dinner, but she never kept the appointment. From that time to the moment when he came upon her in Hatton Garden he had never set eyes on her.

She was as surprised at the meeting as he. But she was as much embarrassed as surprised, begged him with an imploring look in her eyes he could not resist, not to delay her, as she was in a very great hurry, and promised faithfully to meet him the following night at Charing Cross, when she would explain everything. She gave him her hand, and pressed his so tenderly that he could have embraced her on the spot.

Three well-dressed men, with the glossiest of hats,

passed him, and a minute afterwards as he wheeled round to go into his office he turned his head and to his amazement and disgust saw them overtake the young lady and join her.

Carew could not arrive at any other conclusion than that Leonie, if she knew nothing of the robbery, must be acquainted with the robbers, and the thought was agonising.

He could not believe, after what had happened, that she would turn up at the place of meeting, but she was there, as pretty and pathetic a picture of woe and trouble as one could imagine. Peter Carew's heart went out to her at once.

She was all of a tremble, and quite white, and begged him to give her a glass of wine. Then in a walk down the Embankment the story came out—she was the wife of one of the three men. She did not say which and was silent as to his name. Peter Carew, sympathetic and sentimental, felt a lump rising in his throat. How terrible to think of this charming, innocent, unaffected young thing being linked to such a wretch!

"Keep my secret," she implored. "I feel I can confide in you, trust you—ah, yes, with my very soul! Will you promise me that?"

He promised, and, as things turned out, the police were able to act without Carew's assistance. They succeeded in tracking down one of the gang, a man named Max Barnard; the other two got safely away and were never traced.

However treacherously someone had behaved towards him, Barnard was staunch. He refused to say a word, and heard the sentence of twenty years passed upon him with absolute composure.

After the meeting with Leonie at Charing Cross, Peter Carew lost sight of her, and in time he came to regard his romance as something best forgotten. Apparently she had passed out of his life.

But now, at the sight of her, all his infatuation came rushing back. He would have liked to question her. There were so many things he wanted to know.

"You were very good to me in the old days, Peter," said the countess mournfully. "I've never had the opportunity of thanking you."

"You disappeared."

"Yes, I disappeared. It was the only thing I could do. I was afraid I should be dragged into that horrible business. The man I married thought only of himself. He rushed away to America, was involved in some scrimmage in a low drinking bar in San Francisco and was shot. It was a happy release for me. I was in Paris when I heard of it."

"I'm glad to know that," said Carew, when she paused and gave him an opportunity of speaking. "I mean," he added, "glad that you are free."

"Yes—you understand my position now, don't you, Peter?"

She shot him a glance from her mystic eyes, and drooped her dark lashes. Carew felt the blood surging to his head. He forgot himself—he forgot everything but the woman whose magical personality at that moment dominated his own. The next instant his arm was round her waist, as in the old days.

The embrace sent her on a new tack. She sprang to her feet, and throwing back her head with an admirable assumption of scorn and dignity, she cried:

"You forget yourself, Mr. Carew!"

"I beg your pardon!" said he humbly. "Forgive me if for the moment I imagined you were still pretty Leonie Marras. You did love me once—at least, you said you did, and—and I believed you."

"Poor boy!" she sighed, suddenly relenting. "Ah, those dear old times! Those waltzes we used to have together! I did not mean to snub you just now, but I never dare forget I am the Countess of

Lanchester. Oh, how much I owe to you! If I had not known how you kept your word like a true man of honour in the days that are gone, and if I did not know now that my secret, my good name, my happiness, were safe with you—I—but you betrayed me to the earl—why?"

"The fact is, our firm has been robbed of the biggest, the finest, the most valuable diamond the world has ever seen. The man who brought the diamond from Amsterdam was murdered. His body was washed ashore near Parkeston. Embedded in the centre of the heart was found a sharp, lance-like needle, quite five inches long. You see, calling at your house was a sort of desperate effort. I thought perhaps if I could get an interview with you, I might not only satisfy my curiosity as to whether you were my old friend, but that perhaps you might give me some information about the man you must at one time have known."

"Thank you so much for remembering me in such a nice way!" said she icily. "I don't think we need prolong this interview."

And she rose with a stately sweep of her skirts.

Carew was overwhelmed with confusion. He confessed he had made a frightful blunder. Her ladyship amused herself for some little time in watching his anguish, and then, in a softer tone, said:

"Well, we won't say anything more about it. Let us part friends, Peter, for the sake of old times. You may kiss my hand if you like!" she added condescendingly.

Carew raised his eyes to her face. He would have liked to kiss her lips as in the old days, but he dared not. So he bent over the white hand.

"I suppose," said he mournfully, "this is a kind of farewell?"

"Why should it be? I should like to see you occasionally. I will drop you a little note when I've

an hour to spare. But you must give me your word you will never try to see me at Park Lane. It might be very awkward for you."

He promised and attended her to the door. Another tender pressure of the hand, a ravishing smile, and the countess was gone.

That night Alec Helston alighted at Lanchester Station from the London train. He had with him a violin case.

A bleak east wind loaded with sleet was blowing and it was not a night to tempt anyone abroad.

There was no public way through the churchyard. The lych-gate was padlocked, and he had to climb over the low wall. He was some time wandering among the graves before he found the one he wanted. He opened the violin case, and took from it a beautifully fashioned spade, with a sort of heart-shaped blade. With this he commenced digging.

Ten minutes—twenty—thirty—went over, and he found nothing. He dug the grave from end to end and then prodded the soil as far as the spade would go. Still nothing.

Suddenly he straightened himself. His face was livid.

"Satan's cat!" he hissed. "Liar—traitress!"

CHAPTER XII

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH THE RING?

PETER CAREW, after seeing his visitor down the stairs, returned to his room in considerable perturbation of mind. He lit his pipe and paced the floor, his hands in his pockets, a frown upon his face.

"I was an ass to let out about the loss of the stone. Still I don't suppose it'll make an atom of difference. I can't doubt Leonie. For all that I ought to have

kept my tongue quiet. I never intended to tell her a word. How the devil did she induce me? Why didn't I remember that marvellous power of hers that without an apparent effort she gets to know what you're thinking about. It's positively startling."

He tried to get back to the problem which unless it were solved in the recovery of the diamond might mean the collapse of the firm of van Buren, Pintos and Carew, but for the moment he found it impossible. The word "Lanchester" haunted him.

"It's confoundedly familiar," he murmured irritably. "Where the deuce have I heard the name? Ha! I have it! There was a strange murder or something of the kind at the place."

In one corner of the room was a heap of newspapers. A copy of the *Times* was filed every day. Carew turned back to the dates he wanted and was soon immersed in the story of the murder of Maurice Bradley, the inquest and its result.

Two vital points in the narrative arrested Carew's attention and fixed themselves in his mind. One was that Max Barnard was the man who had been doing time for the attempted murder and robbery in those very offices, in which Carew was now sitting, and the other was that the mode of assassination adopted in the case of Maurice Bradley was identical with the method by which the messenger bearing the giant diamond was disposed of.

"By thunder, the thing lies in a nutshell. It's the work of the old gang who nearly did for poor Burrows. Once the law lays its hands on Max Barnard and the business is straightened out. It almost tempts me to go at once to Scotland Yard and open their eyes."

Undoubtedly there were extraordinary coincidences, but these coincidences did not altogether solve the mystery. Why was the Rev. Maurice Bradley murdered? What had he to do with the old gang? Of

course, it might be as had been suggested—Barnard might have " done him in " for the sake of his own safety. But this did not explain the method of the assassin.

The next morning the countess breakfasted in her own suite of rooms, and spent the next hour or so smoking cigarettes and turning things over in her mind.

It was twelve o'clock, and at one she would meet the earl at lunch. At last the finishing touches were applied to the toilet and her ladyship sallied forth, swept down the broad staircase to the dining-room, and entered with all stateliness and grace.

The earl was standing in front of the fire, with his legs planted widely apart, his hands in his pockets, and his eyes directed on the floor. He looked as if he had something on his mind.

The countess saw this in an instant, and as it was very important she should keep the earl in a good temper, she went up to him, laid her hands one on each shoulder, and held up her mouth to be kissed.

" You don't look well, dear!" she said. " What's the matter?"

" I'm perfectly well, Leonie!" he answered, somewhat coldly.

It was clear that either the earl was worried in his mind or worried in his digestion. No dish that he touched was quite right, and he seemed impervious to the countess's little sallies of banter, which she had before found so efficacious in restoring his good humour.

When they were alone, and the earl had somewhat soothed himself with a cigar, he opened fire with a bombshell.

" I wish you'd show me that diamond ring I saw in your rooms the other night, Leonie!" said he abruptly.

" I'm awfully sorry, dear," said she, sweetly,

" that I haven't got it. You know, I told you I hated the thing."

" It's a deuced odd thing!" he burst out. " I was certain I recollected the crest engraved inside that ring, and I verified it yesterday at the club. It's the Balmaine crest."

" Well, darling, and suppose it is—what then?" replied the countess, her tones becoming still more mellifluous.

" What then! Why, you must have known him in the old days at Monte Carlo, or somewhere. He must have given you the ring. Why didn't you tell me he was a former acquaintance of yours?"

" My dear Marmaduke, how absurd you are! I know nothing whatever about the man. Pray don't let us have a repetition of the scene last night. I might not be able to keep my temper so well as I did then."

" Keep your temper," rejoined the earl sarcastically. " I like that. Why, you were a blazing volcano. Anyhow, I'll chance that. I want to get at the bottom of your deception. What have you done with the ring?"

" I changed it for another. I told you I was going to do so. Do you know Viola's place in Great Portland Street?"

" How the deuce should I? Is it a milliner's, or dressmaker's, or what?"

" It's everything. Viola is a most interesting woman. She buys everything, and you can get the most astounding bargains there if you have the entrée. It's very exclusive, you know. I sold the ring to her this morning. She knew the crest, too. I had not the slightest idea it was Lord Balmaine's. When she told me I was angry with myself I had kept the ring so long. You will forgive me, won't you?"

She crept very close to her husband, and put her

white, round soft arm about his neck. Rather to her surprise, his manner softened. Her story had satisfied him.

She was terribly pressed for money, and it was of the highest importance she should get a cheque for at least £1,000 out of him, and so she would have to be "nice."

"Dear, darling 'Duke," she whispered, "I want you to be very kind and indulgent to me to-day. I've broken the tenth commandment."

"I did that once," returned the earl grimly, "and I'm not sure I didn't make a mistake. What is it you want?"

"Just the loveliest pearl necklace in the world. I saw it in Townsend's window in Bond Street yesterday, and he only wants £950 for it. You'd like to see a pearl necklace round my neck, wouldn't you?"

"I should have thought you had enough jewellery to satisfy any woman!"

"Of diamonds, yes. But pearls—I don't think I've any pearls worth looking at."

"Well, I'll think it over," rejoined the earl, rising to his feet. "I've had a lot of your bills in this morning. You know, I'm very good-natured, but, hang it, one must draw the line somewhere. I think you must do without the pearls. By the way, where did you say this place of—Viola, I think was the name you mentioned, was? I might find some pearls there to suit you."

"Indeed you won't. She objects to gentlemen customers and you'll not be admitted."

"Well, we'll see," and without saying another word, he stalked from the room, leaving the countess livid with rage.

She sat for a moment staring at the fire with basilisk-like eyes. Just then she was at her wits' end for money.

"Well," she muttered, "after all, I've Balmaine. He'll write a cheque for me at once."

She went to her writing-table, and dashed off a little note, telling Lord Balmaine she had the evening free, and would be delighted to dine with him.

Then she rushed to her rooms, dressed herself, stole out by the private door, and posted the letter herself.

CHAPTER XIII

LONDON'S SUBTERRANEAN STREAM

No woman could be more fascinating than Leonie was that night, when the enraptured Lord Balmaine met her at the Hotel Imperial, and was sent into the seventh heaven of delight on seeing that she was wearing the ring he had given her—the ring which she told her husband she had exchanged for another.

After an artistic little dinner, and while the two were smoking cigarettes cosily seated together, she confided to him what she called a tiny secret. She had been playing baccarat at a certain house, where the stakes were always high, and she had lost £1,500.

"I consider it a privilege to be able to come to your rescue," exclaimed the infatuated young man. "It's beastly unlucky I haven't my cheque-book with me. But never mind, I'll send you a draft the first thing to-morrow morning."

"Can't you give me the cheque to-night?"

"Only by going home. But I see so little of you, it's a shame to cut short these few hours of bliss."

"Yes, yes; but the dinner can be repeated, and it's so important I should be able to pay this wretched debt to-morrow morning. Take me as far as your house, Aubrey, dear boy, and leave me in the carriage while you write the cheque."

Within a quarter of an hour or so, his car was in front of his house, and the countess was left alone.

"I was certain," she murmured, "he would be as good as a gold-mine to me. I suppose I must let him kiss me. Well, there's no harm in *that*."

She was settling herself comfortably in the corner of the limousine, when she heard a tapping at the window on the off-side. For a moment, an icy feeling seized her heart. She had never ceased to dwell upon the horrible possibility that the convict was roaming in London—perhaps searching for her.

Again came the tapping. She forced herself to lean forward, for in two or three minutes Balmaine would return.

She saw clearly through the carriage window the face of Alec Helston!

In a flash the window was let down.

"What is it?" she breathed.

"Meet me at King's Cross at twelve to-night. Remember, you *must*."

He did not wait for her answer, but turned, and vanished in the darkness. She had no time to think, for Balmaine had returned with the slip of paper.

"There you are, countess," said he, gaily. "I've made it even money—£2,000. I suppose you don't object?"

A distant clock sounded the hour of eleven. At midnight she was bound to be at King's Cross. How was she to get rid of Lord Balmaine?

She was quite equal to the occasion.

She fell back in the carriage, uttering a deep sigh; then Balmaine heard her say:

"Open the windows, for Heaven's sake! I'm choking! I'm dying!"

Frightfully alarmed, the nobleman did as he was bid, and bent over the lady, who certainly was paler than usual.

"What's the matter?" he whispered, anxiously.

"One of my attacks—the heart," she murmured, faintly. "Worry of the last four days—insomnia at

night—and the excitement of this evening, have been too much for me. Pray let your man set me down about a hundred yards from my house. The fresh air will restore me."

His lordship was terribly upset at this miserable termination to his hours of bliss, but there was no help for it. He did as he was ordered.

Directly she was alone, she ran to the private entrance, opened the door with her latchkey, and darted into her rooms.

She tore off her dinner dress frantically, put on a tailor-made gown, and in less than five minutes was out of the house again. A swift taxi took her to King's Cross, and she got out at the gates of the Great Northern Railway Station. She went direct to the main-line booking-office, where she knew Alec Helston would be awaiting her. It was an old place of assignation. She saw him, his head bent down, walking nervously to and fro, near the entrance to the first-class waiting-room, and rapidly approaching him, touched his arm.

"What's happened?" she breathed.

"Max is in London I've seen him!"

Though the news chilled her heart, she showed no sign of terror.

"Where is he?"

"Working on a barge—must have struck across country and got somehow on to the Grand Junction Canal, and so to the Regent's Canal. Anyhow, the barge is lying off a wharf near the Caledonian Road Bridge, and he's with it."

A dead silence. The man looked at the woman. That sinister glance in the eyes of both could mean only one thing—murder!

"Take me to the place," she whispered, hoarsely.

He nodded, and led the way out of the station, where they got into a cab. In ten minutes they were creeping stealthily down to the waterside.

The barge was moving slowly. A man was piloting it into the centre of the canal, which at this point was narrow. It was being propelled towards a small, low-crowned arch. This arch was the commencement of a tunnel through which the canal runs from the Caledonian Road to the east side of High Street, Islington, disappearing from sight for about half-a-mile.

There is no towing-path to this mysterious, invisible stream, and the bargees propel the barges by lying on their backs and using their feet against the roof of the tunnel.

A man was lying on the top of the cargo, no doubt in readiness to act in this fashion. The light at the stem of the barge threw a deep shadow, and as the coffin-shaped thing glided by, a crouching figure stepped from the bank on to the wide gunwale serving as a sort of platform. The crouching figure was Leonie's.

Just before she stepped on to the gunwale, she had whispered to Alec Helston :

" Go to the old place—King's Cross Station—and wait for me. If I don't come back in an hour's time, save yourself. You may then reckon I've got the worst of this business."

The barge slowly glided into the black entrance of the tunnel. Propelled by the feet of the man lying on his back, it seemed to her to move scarcely more than a foot or so in a minute. Her first thought was that the fellow who was driving his feet against the arched roof was the man of whom she was in search. But, cautiously peeping above the cargo, which was covered over by tarpaulins, she soon saw it was not.

She had been in the tunnel about ten minutes, when the barge stopped. Whoever was holding the tiller had run the boat close to the side, and she could hear its timber grating against the brickwork. The man had ceased to move his feet.

All at once she was conscious of something pressing against her from beneath the tarpaulin. This something, whatever it was, moved slowly and stealthily. She was overcome with horror, and for once in her life her nervous system gave way. It was with difficulty she repressed a cry.

Her face was towards the head of the boat, and she saw, some ten or twelve feet in front of her, the tarpaulin lift, and a man creep from beneath it. She had no doubt who this was. Max Barnard! She would know him among a thousand.

She saw the convict, after creeping some five or six feet, stand bolt upright, and apparently feel for something in the wall. The men on the barge must clearly have been old pals of his. They knew, also, what he was seeking, and the man in the bows unhitched his lantern and held it up, to throw more light on the wall.

The light showed the convict's hand grasping a ring let into the wall. He gave this ring a sudden jerk outwards and then pulled it downward. The next thing she saw was the opening of a kind of vertical trapdoor. She watched the man swing himself upwards and disappear within the black, square opening, and then the trap was closed.

Quite another ten minutes went over, before the other end of the tunnel was reached. Leonie's next step was to get from the barge as soon as possible. There was not very much difficulty. At the other end, a horse was waiting to continue the journey, and the boat was brought close to the bank. Beyond was the yard attached to a wharf, with gates opening to a street.

She treaded her way through the yard, and came out in a part of London quite strange to her. However, by degrees she found herself in Upper Street, Islington, and, getting into the first taxi she came to, was driven to King's Cross. When she joined Alec

Helston, she found him gnawing his nails, and consumed with anxiety.

"I've seen him—Max Barnard!" she burst out.

"Yes—and—"

"You'll have to track him."

"You—you could do nothing, then?" he stammered.

"Not the ghost of a chance. I never was in such a horrible place."

In a few graphic words she related her experience. He listened moodily, chewing the end of his cigar.

"See here," she wound up with, "if you're half as clever as you say I usually am, you'll run Max to earth. You may lay your life that trapdoor leads to a den of some kind, which you ought easily to find out. All you've to do is to settle the lay of the tunnel. There oughtn't to be any difficulty about that. Aren't there Government maps—what do you call them?"

"Ordnance maps, do you mean?"

"Yes, ordnance maps. Well, that tunnel's certain to be marked. As near as I could tell, this trapdoor was about mid-way. Oughtn't that to be enough to go upon?"

"Maybe. Old Rag had a coining den somewhere about that point. But I don't care about that low lot. I've been living the life of a gentleman——"

"Yes, thanks to me," she put in, bitterly.

"Oh, I suppose you wouldn't have supplied me with funds if it hadn't suited you. Hang it, Leonie, I've put you on the right track for money, and for what you'd give your soul for, and what's my reward? Lies!"

"Lies, Alec? I don't understand you."

"Oh, you understand me well enough!" he retorted, angrily. "Didn't you tell me a downright lie when you said the Thing was in the parson's grave?"

"No. I swear I told you the truth. I suppose you've been putting my words to the test?"

"Yes, I went down to Lanchester after I last saw you, and dug up the ground from head to foot, twenty-four inches, at least. Nothing there!"

She recoiled for an instant; then she clutched his arm.

"It is you who are lying!" she almost shrieked. "The Thing *is* there! It must be there! Don't say it's gone!"

"But that's what I do say, and that's what I stick to," he returned, doggedly.

"I shan't be satisfied until I've dug the ground for myself," she gasped. "You and I must go to Lanchester. But, meanwhile, Max must be found. Do you hear?"

CHAPTER XIV

ADELE, THE TRAITRESS

LEONIE was back in the Park Lane mansion, her face white, drawn, and haggard, her dress torn and bedraggled. She ascended the stairs slowly and painfully.

When she reached the door of her room, she listened. She thought she heard someone moving about.

Quietly she turned the handle, and entered suddenly. Adele was in front of the glass, trying on one of her mistress's hats. The girl saw the reflection of the lady in the glass, and gave a little scream.

Leonie was in that mood when the slightest thing would send her into a fury. The sight of the girl was too much for her. The next moment she had torn the hat from Adele's head, and with it a handful of hair, for she had not stopped to remove the hat-pin, and dashed both into the fire.

The girl gave a scream of agony, and fell on her

knees, bathed in tears. Both the fury and the strength of the countess appalled her.

"You go to-morrow morning! I'll not endure such impertinence! Out of my sight, or I may do you an injury!"

In a few minutes she was herself again, and thinking what a fool she had been to allow her temper to get the better of her.

She was dead with fatigue, and once in bed, soon dropped into a heavy sleep. She never heard a key turn and the door softly open. A shadowy figure crept in, and cast a rapid glance around. A faint light from a gas jet near the bed enabled the intruder to see everything in the room. She wandered from object to object, found in one of her mistress's gowns something that interested her, crept out again, and locked the door.

The earl lunched alone the next day. The countess was suffering from a violent headache, and wanted a long rest.

Lord Lanchester's temper had not improved since the previous day. More bills had come in. Six months before it would not have mattered in the least. He was in the heyday of his infatuation; he would then have lavished a fortune on her.

He was just as infatuated now, but his infatuation was tinged with jealousy. Some friend had asked him whether Lady Lanchester had not been with Lord Balmaine to the theatre. He denied it so hotly that the friend was sorry he had said anything.

But, although his lordship was emphatic in his denial, it did not prevent him making cautious inquiries as to whether the countess was at home on the night in question. He found she was not.

This absence might have been a coincidence, but it kept the sore open. Neither was he satisfied with his wife's explanation about the ring. The Earl of Lanchester was an old and wary bird in intrigue, and the

lady's story of how she obtained it at Monte Carlo did not sound truthful. In any case, it must have been given her by Lord Balmaine.

He had just finished his lunch, when a letter arrived by post. The address was in a scratchy, foreign hand.

When he tore open the envelope, a cheque, enclosed in a piece of blank letter-paper, dropped out.

The cheque was for £2,000, drawn by Lord Balmaine in favour of "Leonie Marras"!

He pinched his white lips, and rang for his man. Half-an-hour later he came out, perfectly groomed, and walked down to the Pall Mall Club, where he was pretty certain to find Balmaine.

"Lord Balmaine?" said the obsequious hall-porter. "No, he has not been to-day. About four o'clock is generally his hour, my lord."

It was then three. The earl went to the smoking-room and threw himself into a comfortable lounging-chair.

That hour gave him an opportunity for nursing his wrongs, and he nursed them on brandy. A little past four o'clock, when Balmaine—looking cool, insolent and debonair—strolled in, Lord Lanchester's face was flushed, his voice thick, and his hand unsteady.

Balmaine did not see the earl, and was chatting with the friend who had accompanied him, when he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. He turned, and saw at once that something was amiss.

"A word with you!" said the earl. "Come with me to the other end of the room."

"Is this your handwriting?" said the elderly nobleman, whipping the cheque from his pocket and holding it close to the young man's face.

Balmaine went very white. Of what indiscretion had the countess been guilty, to allow her husband to get hold of that damnatory document?

"Yes, it is mine," said he, in a voice that was not quite steady.

"Then, sir, eat your own words!"

And, crumpling up the slip of paper, he flung it in Balmaine's face. The young nobleman, stung by the insult, flushed crimson, and raised his clenched fist. The intended blow, however, did not fall. Balmaine's friend, already on the alert, and guessing a quarrel was impending, was close at hand, and seized the young man's arm.

"Stop, Balmaine, you shall not. Lanchester's twice your age!" he cried. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, for shame!"

The young man and the old man glared at each other, their teeth set, the one pale as death, the other with an angry flush on his yellow, sunken cheeks. Lord Lanchester's outburst of rage was over. The brandy he had taken had had its effect, and the reaction had followed instantly. His nerves now were under perfect control.

Lord Balmaine, on the other hand, was terribly agitated. He had never before had a quarrel of this kind, and he scarcely knew what course to take. Whatever provocation he had given the earl, the latter had grossly insulted him in the presence of the members of the club.

"Don't have a scene here, Lanchester," whispered one of the men who had interposed. "Can I be of any use?"

"No, sir. This is a matter between Lord Balmaine and myself," said the nobleman, haughtily. "For what I did just now, Lord Balmaine has his remedy. Leave us, Danvers. Lord Balmaine and myself are quite capable of managing this affair without any assistance."

The men, who had interfered, retired, and Lanchester and Balmaine were left alone. The next thing

the earl did was to pick up the crumpled cheque and put it in his pocket.

"You heard what I said just now to Sir George Danvers?" he went on, coldly. "I presume the affair can have but one termination—you are not prepared to make an explanation?"

"I do not intend to offer one," returned Balmaine. "All I have to say is this—no blame rests on Lady Lanchester."

"Thank you," said the earl, bowing stiffly. "When I ask you to defend the countess, it will be time enough for you to express an opinion. At present her honour is in my hands. Has she returned the ring you were good enough to present to her?"

This was but a chance shot, but it told. Lord Balmaine recoiled as though he had been struck between the eyes.

A sarcastic smile wreathed the lips of the earl.

"I see you evade my question. Perhaps it is as well. I shall expect to hear from you to-morrow."

And he strode away, his eyes glinting with a reddish light from beneath his bushy grey brows, his square jaw protruding slightly, his mouth drawn a little down at the corners, the whole expression suggesting a savage old wolf.

In the meantime, Leonie, after languidly breakfasting, about mid-day, suddenly thought of the cheque. The exciting events of the previous night had driven all remembrance of the Balmaine episode from her mind, until it suddenly occurred to her as she was sipping her tea.

Setting down the cup with such violence that it broke into half-a-dozen pieces, she flew into her bedroom and searched the pocket of the dinner-dress she was wearing when Lord Balmaine handed her the cheque.

The pocket was empty!

Frantically she searched the room. No success. She paced the room in despair.

Only one solution of the mystery was possible—her maid, Adele.

"The wretch has robbed me!" she gasped.

Her first impulse was to accuse the girl straight away, but what was the good? Adele was an adept at telling lies, and would be certain to brazen it out.

"If she hasn't passed it on to one of her friends to cash, I may be in time to stop it."

She left her unfinished breakfast, hurriedly dressed and descended the broad staircase. It was about half-past one. The earl would be in the middle of his lunch. Should she present herself to him or not?

As she passed the dining-room she saw the door was open, and she had a good view of the dining-table. The earl was not there. What did this mean? By looking through the slit near the hinges, she could see the other part of the room. Only Lampiter, his lordship's body-servant, was hovering noiselessly about.

She ventured boldly into the room.

"Where's Lord Lanchester, Lampiter?"

"His lordship went out about two or three minutes ago."

"Do you mean he left the house?"

"Yes, my lady. I don't think he'd quite finished his lunch. He received a letter, and directly afterwards went to his room, and I assisted him to dress. He then went out."

This was somehow disquieting to her ladyship, coming so swiftly upon the loss of the cheque. A torn envelope was on the floor. The countess picked it up and glanced at the writing.

She recognised the spidery scrawl at once. It was Adele's!

CHAPTER XV

LORD BALMAINE'S DILEMMA

WORRIED and perturbed, she made her way to Betterton's Bank, Pall Mall, on which Lord Balmaine's cheque was drawn. She asked for the manager, and in her most fascinating manner explained her errand. No cheque of Lord Balmaine's, said the official, had been presented that morning.

"Of course, if the cheque will be presented, you will stop it?"

"Certainly."

The countess quitted the bank, and returned to Park Lane. She went to her own suite of rooms, and rang for Adele. There was no answer. Her eye fell upon a couple of letters in a rack. One, unstamped, was from Adele, the other from Alec Helston.

She tore open the letter from the girl first. As she half expected, Adele had taken herself off. The letter was a pert epistle, giving no reason beyond her determination not to endure "miladi's" tyranny and brutality any longer.

Leonie, her face livid with rage, tore the letter into fragments, and cast them into the fire.

She took up Helston's letter, her thumb on the seal. Her sensitive fingers felt something queer about the wax. In an instant, her suspicions were aroused.

"The detestable little spy, she has opened the letter! I might have guessed as much!"

The lady's face was as dark as midnight. If Alec had been indiscreet, he would have delivered her absolutely into the hands of the spiteful Abigail. She opened the letter with trembling fingers.

"Dear Leonie," wrote Helston, "You must send me £200 by return of post. I've got on the track of

Max's pals, but they're of the shark variety. They won't move a step unless I square them, and they're opening their mouths pretty wide. Expect to hear from you.—A."

She dropped the letter into the fire, and, as she watched it slowly burn, murmured:

"That fool Balmaine will have to draw me another cheque. The first one's worthless now that I have stopped it, so he'll lose nothing. I shall tell him I've lost it. I shan't say a word about that hussy, Adele."

Lord Balmaine was in the library of his stately old mansion in Mayfair, standing in front of the blazing fire, his elbows on the elaborately carved mantelshelf, his long, delicate, aristocratic-looking hands supporting his forehead.

He had just come from the encounter with Lord Lanchester, and was a prey to the bitterest reproaches a man could utter against himself. He had trusted a woman, and she had either purposely deceived him or had heedlessly blundered. Whether the one or the other, the result was the same—a duel. He could not avoid it. He had been publicly insulted, and that insult could only be wiped out in one way. The earl in his early days had lived some years in Paris, and had been one of the leaders in Parisian fashionable society. He had fought not one, but half-a-dozen, duels. Such functions were matters of everyday occurrence during the Second Empire, and were usually bloodless affairs. Balmaine could not think the challenge he was about to send would be a childish, make-believe occasion of this kind.

"Anyway, Leonie shan't suffer from anything that may fall from *my* lips," he murmured, when a servant, after tapping at the door, entered the room.

He was holding a letter in his hand.

"What do you want, Patterson?" said the young lord, fretfully. "Didn't I tell you I was not to be disturbed?"

"Yes, my lord; but the lady——"

The servant did not complete the sentence. Balmaine had hastily snatched the letter from him and tore it open:

"Dear Lord Balmaine,—I must see you for an instant. Forgive me. Your unhappy L."

"Show the lady in here, Patterson," said he, huskily.

"Dear Lord Balmaine, I am so glad to find you at home!" Leonie cried, advancing towards him and holding out both her hands, on one of which the ring he had given her, sparkling in its thousand lights, seemed to jeer at him. "You can't think how shockingly silly I've been! I've lost your cheque!"

"I know it!" said Balmaine, in a hollow tone.

"You know it!" exclaimed the lady, in blank astonishment.

He was silent. He was wondering how light and airy was her manner. Was she really aware of what had happened?

Suddenly it dawned upon her how terribly ill he was looking. Here was a chance of still working upon him. She would show how sympathetic she could be.

She came close to him and laid a hand on each shoulder. The stone in the ring flashed more than ever. She raised her face, and her mystic, provoking eyes gazed into his.

"Aubrey, you're not well. What ails you?" she whispered.

There was a magical fire in the wicked sparkle of her eyes, in those soft, alluring tones. An irresistible torrent of passion swept over his heart and brain. He obeyed an unconquerable impulse. His arm went round her, and in that all-absorbing embrace he kissed her lips. He was madly exultant. After all, if he was going to fight for this woman, why should he not have his reward?

Leonie was taken by surprise; but she did not re-

sist, nor was there any reason why she should. His delirium of love was all to her advantage. This time the cheque should be for £5,000, she thought.

A few seconds of silence. She allowed him to remain in his fool's paradise, and then, all at once, he was plunged, so to speak, into an icy bath. Voices were heard outside. Patterson was expostulating with someone, and that someone was the Earl of Lanchester.

The countess knew the voice, too, and, in a voice suffocated with fright and rage, murmured:

"My husband! He must not find me here! Hide me, hide me, for Heaven's sake!"

Not far from the centre of the room was a full-length portrait of Lord Balmaine, resting on an easel, the ledge supporting the picture coming to about ten inches from the ground. The painting had been sent home the day before, and was standing on the easel, awaiting criticism.

The countess glided behind the picture, just as the door was flung violently open and the earl entered.

Balmaine was placing the lamp on the bracket, and the action must have appeared to the earl a perfectly natural one. The light came at the exact angle to show the picture to advantage. Lord Lanchester shrugged his shoulders. It seemed to him as though he had surprised Balmaine in an act of vanity.

"Why don't you teach your servants to be consistent in their lies?" he demanded, brusquely. "First your man said you were in, then he tried to make out you were not; finally, he said you were indisposed, and couldn't see anyone, and I must confess I lost my temper."

"I regret you have been inconvenienced. Patterson, you may go."

The servant hurried out of the room, glad enough to get away. He had not the least idea of the real state of affairs, for Lady Lanchester was a stranger

to him, but he could see well enough there were all the elements of a storm ready to hand.

He had looked round the room for the lady whom only a few minutes before he had admitted, and could not see her.

"Where the doose has he put her?—that's what beats me!" he muttered, as he made his way to the servant's hall. "Jiggered if she ain't like the vanishing lady at the 'Ome of Mystery! Jolly glad I didn't say my lord was engaged. That would have given the show away. I don't envy old Lampiter. He must have a bally hot time with the earl!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE COUNTESS INTERVENES

When the servant was gone, the earl's irritation disappeared. Balmaine kept up the farce of politeness by pointing to a chair. The elder nobleman refused it quietly.

"I've been thinking over this matter, Balmaine. It's one that concerns us alone. Do you agree with me that there's no necessity for seconds?"

"Just as you please," answered Balmaine, bowing.

"Very well, that's settled. As we don't intend to make a fuss, there's no need to go out of England. I've a house in Chesham Square which is at the present moment to let. The ballroom is forty feet long, amply sufficient for our purpose. Have you any objection?"

"Not the slightest," rejoined Balmaine, mechanically.

His face was whiter than ever, but he had now perfect command of himself. It was clear that the earl had not the slightest knowledge that his wife was in the house, and this conviction gave him a sense of infinite relief

"Another thing has occurred to me," went on the earl, bending his brows till they almost met, and speaking in a cold, impassioned tone. "As our main object is to avoid scandal, supposing either of us fall, we must take such precautions as will prevent the curious prying into our affairs."

"Quite so. What do you suggest?"

"That I should write a letter in which I declare my intention of committing suicide. You will do the same. The letter will be found on my body or yours, as the case may be, and people will be satisfied. How does that strike you?"

"An admirable arrangement."

"Very well, then. We need say no more. Will to-morrow evening, at a quarter to six, suit you?"

"Certainly," echoed the other. "You might perhaps give me the number of the house in Chesham Square."

"Oh, ay, yes, of course," rejoined the earl, hastily, "No. 134."

Balmaine made a note of the address, and waited inquiringly for anything the earl might have further to say; but his lordship had finished.

"I wish you good-day! As I possess the key of the house, I shall arrive first. You may depend upon me being punctual."

And, with a grave bow, he turned on his heel, and Balmaine, not to be outdone in politeness, preceded him down the staircase, and attended him to the hall door.

Nothing could have been done in better taste, or with a higher regard for each other's feelings.

Balmaine returned to the library. The countess, her face deadly pale, had come from behind the easel.

She paused for a moment. A hideous scheme was beginning to take root in her mind. She had felt that during the last few weeks her influence over the earl was waning. Here was an opportunity of binding

Lord Balmaine to herself with bonds from which he could not release himself.

Suddenly she flung her arms round the young nobleman's neck, and burst into a flood of hysterical sobbing. The tears did not come, but this was of no importance. Lord Balmaine was sufficiently impressed by the sobs. What could he do more than return her embrace?

"Aubrey, Aubrey," she wailed, "don't cast me from you for what I'm going to say."

"Cast you from me, Leonie? Never! I love you, and—and if the result of this duel be my death—well, I shall die thinking of you!"

"Aubrey, I hate my husband! Why hasn't he given me a chance to defend myself? It's because he's only too ready to believe the worst of me. Aubrey, do you really, truly, love me?"

Her eyes were steadily gazing into his. The look in them fascinated, and yet almost terrified him.

"Do I love you, Leonie?" he exclaimed, drawing a deep breath. "What a question! Is there anything I've ever refused you?"

"Then don't refuse me this," she whispered. "Aubrey, you must kill my husband!"

The young nobleman went icy cold. Was she inciting him to murder?

"I shall take my chance, as he will take his," he murmured. "You don't wish me to fight unfairly?"

"It will be a duel to the death. Do you look at it in that way?"

"Lord Lanchester does, I am sure."

"And I'm sure, also. Promise me you'll fight as he fights—that you won't fire in the air, or commit any folly of that kind."

Such a thought had indeed crossed the mind of the young nobleman. The countess read the meaning of his hesitation.

"As you love me, Aubrey, I beg of you not to be

quixotic. Why should you throw your life away? Promise me—promise your Leonie—promise your own Leonie. If the earl should fall in fair fight—do you understand?"

She lowered her voice to the merest breath; there was the fire of temptation in her eyes. The look said as plainly as though she had uttered the words: "If the earl should be killed, I will become your wife."

"Yes," said he slowly, "I understand. I promise."

She kissed him, passionately, and, without giving him time to recall his words, swept from the room.

Lord Balmaine, his face perfectly bloodless, walked to the fire, and for some little time gazed into the glowing mass, as if to read the future there. Then he went to the table, and wrote for over an hour. In that time, he completed two documents. One was the letter suggested by the Earl of Lanchester, stating his intention of committing suicide. The other was his will, one of the clauses of which was a legacy of £50,000 to the Countess of Lanchester.

CHAPTER XVII

RAG'S UNDERGROUND DEN

In a strange apartment sat Max Barnard, the escaped convict. The room where he was crouching was about eight feet square. In the centre of the ceiling was a plate of perforated zinc, for ventilation. The air was hot and close, and it was an easy matter to drop off to sleep. Soon he was breathing heavily.

In about half-an-hour's time was heard the sound of a click. Part of the woodwork, about four feet by two, near the furnace, slowly opened, and a red, unkempt head protruded itself into the room, and a pair of sharp, grey eyes took in everything at a glance—

the sleeping figure in the Windsor chair in front of the fire, the table, on which was a plate, a knife and fork, a mug, and a loaf of bread; the lamp on a nail at the side, the sea-chest with rope handles against one of the walls, the trap-door in the floor, with a ring in the centre and bolts at the ends.

"He's eaten his grub and he's gorn off to sleep," said the red head. "Righto!"

The owner of the red head stole noiselessly into the room. She was a girl of about sixteen or seventeen. She advanced towards the man, and stood looking at him for a minute or so.

"I wonder if he's got it abart 'im anywhere?" she said, in a low voice. "I'd like to have a look at the sparkle agen."

Agnes, or Aggy, as she was generally called, knew that which had excited her curiosity so strongly was in his pocket, but for the moment it was out of her reach. How could she unbutton the coat without awaking him? She contented herself with clearing away the plate, the knife and fork, and the mug.

Max Barnard was left alone. He awoke with a start soon after the girl had left him, his forehead bedewed with perspiration, his eyes wild and staring.

"Dashed if I didn't think the 'flies' were on my track, and had collared me!" he muttered. "Only a dream! I shouldn't much care," he added, slowly, "if I could only get my own back."

He rose and went to the door through which Aggy had disappeared, and tried the fastening. It could be bolted on the inside, if necessary, and he made himself secure.

Suddenly came the sound of tapping, in the direction of the trap-door. The tapping was peculiar. It had a sort of rhythmic beat.

At Dartmoor, Max Barnard had been known as one of the "tic-tac" men—convicts who know how to talk to each other by a series of knocks with the

hammer in the workshops, with the trowel if bricklaying, with the fingers on the iron walls of their cells, if the latter are adjoining.

Barnard read the meaning of the tapping easily. The message ran:

"It's me—Rag. Open at once."

Stooping, Barnard shot back the bolts, lifted the trap, and a fur cap, of the kind favoured by bargees, appeared, followed by a head and a body.

A queer-looking fellow was old Rag—a little below the middle height, without an atom of superfluous flesh upon him, very long arms, considering the size of his body, and bow legs, like those of a jockey.

"Gosh!" he ejaculated. "I've had a run for it. As narrer a squeak as ever I had in my life."

As the man spoke, the water gradually ran from his clothes and made a little pool on the floor. He picked up his cap, pulled out the lining as far as it would come, and placed it near the fire to dry.

"I tell yer, old pal, it 'ud ha' been a fair cop, I'd got ten pounds' worth of stuff on me, and there wasn't no way o' getting away from it. Look 'ere!"

He dived his hands first into one pocket and then into another, and dragged out little newspaper packets, which, upon being opened, disclosed a quantity of silver coin.

"I tell yer, matey, it's a wonder I wasn't a goner, wiv all this weight in my pocket. I was nigh dead beat when I reached the trap. I'll put the stuff away, and then I'll change me clobber. Dashed if they ain't a-beginning to stick ter me!"

While Rag was thus occupied, Max Barnard was absorbed in studying the fragments of paper which Rag had left on the table. He hardly heard what the other was saying, so intently was he staring at one particular scrap of printed matter. It interested him immensely, and no wonder, for he had caught

sight of his own name—or, at least, a bit of it—"Max Bar—" the rest was torn.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded, fiercely.

"It was my pal as wrapped up the stuff. He's a sterrytyper, and works at a printer's not fur from Charing Cross. They does a lot o' Government perlice work."

The next moment he shuffled to the door, slid back the bolts, and disappeared.

With agitated fingers he spread out the crumpled scraps of paper, and tried to piece them together. A couple fitted, but no ingenuity could make the others join.

The first half of this word was "Mur," the second, "der." Together, the sinister combination, "Murder," faced him. The fragment on which the first syllable of this dread word appeared, related to himself. There was his name—Max Barnard—in bold type. The word "Lanch," torn at the last letter, was evidently meant for "Lanchester." The name of the murdered man could not be made out. "Belf," clearly stood for "belfry." The minor words sufficed to tell him that this was a police notice, warning the public that he, "Max Barnard," was "wanted" in connection with the murder of—this the paper did not say.

He went over the other scraps of paper, and made out that a diamond of "fabulous value" had been stolen on its way from Amsterdam to Parkeston, and that its custodian had been murdered.

A diamond! That sparkling lump of brilliancy almost as big as a plover's egg he had with him. Why——

His eyes fell upon the last line.

"Contained in an india-rubber pouch, about——"

He shivered from head to foot. The brilliant stone he had in his possession was stained with blood. If he had ever dreamed of turning the stone into money,

this ominous discovery would have completely knocked the idea on the head.

"She must have known how it was cursed," he muttered. "Yes, that was why she wanted to hide it."

Suddenly his reverie was broken—broken by the sound of blows, and the cries of a girl.

He did not stop to think; but, opening the narrow door, he rushed up the dark stairs which, through a little lobby, led to the room above.

He dashed into the room, just as the brutal Rag was in the act of bringing a stout rattan cane down on the shoulders of the girl.

Before the stick could descend, it was twisted out of the old brute's hand, broken into three pieces, and tossed into the fire. Rag, infuriated, turned upon his interrupter, only to receive a straight hit that fairly knocked him off his feet.

Rag was like an india-rubber ball, and almost as difficult to hurt.

"What's that fur? Can't I give me own flesh and blood a lickin' when she deserves it?" he snarled.

"Not while I'm by. I said I'd give you a thrashing if you tried that game on again, and I've done it. That's all! Don't you touch her any more."

Meanwhile, Aggy had scrambled to her feet.

"You're a good old sort, an' I ain't a-goin' ter forget it," she whispered to Barnard, as she shuffled from the room.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DUEL

A COLD drizzle was falling; pavement and roadway were coated with the black, viscid mud, peculiar to the Metropolis. A taxi stopped at the corner of

Wigmore Street, and Lord Balmaine alighted, paid the cabman, and walked rapidly towards Chesham Square.

Now that the actual moment had come for fulfilling his promise, his resolution was beginning to fail him. He would receive the earl's shot, but he would not return it. He had gone back to his first determination. He would fire in the air.

This determination was in his mind when, crossing the square, he came in sight of the mansion where he had arranged to meet Lord Lanchester. He had nearly reached the railings when, from under the shade of the trees of the enclosure, glided in front of him the graceful figure of a woman. She raised her thick veil, and the countess stood before him.

"You, Leonie!" he cried, involuntarily. "Why have you come?"

"I wanted to see you," she breathed. "I felt I must. Don't you understand that your destiny—your very life—is now part of mine?"

"My life! That isn't worth very much just now, considering the errand which is taking me to yonder house!" said he, with a faint smile.

"So you think," she replied, excitedly, "but I know better. Listen to me. You don't know that when I feel like it, I can influence the luck of men! I've proved my power not once, but scores of times. Don't mistake me. I tell you that not only will you succeed in doing what I asked you, but you'll come from that house unharmed."

Her influence was extraordinary. Lord Balmaine thought no more of his former resolve. Yes, he would do what she told him.

The house was dark, from basement to roof. There were bills in some of the windows announcing that the place was to let. He raised the knocker, and gave a loud rat-tat.

Slow, heavy footsteps approached. The next

minute the door was opened, and Lord Lanchester stood before him.

"You are punctual," said he, coldly. "Have the goodness to follow me."

Lord Lanchester led the way up a stately staircase to a vast apartment.

"I'm glad you are here to time," began the earl. "Had you arrived at five minutes past six, we should have had to put off our affair until to-morrow."

"Indeed. May I ask why?"

"The reason's plain enough. Can't you see that, being without seconds, we shall have no one to drop the handkerchief? It would be obviously a mistake for either of us to give the signal. However fair both of us might desire to be, one's nerves are not always to be depended upon. If I fired at the very moment I opened my lips, it would give me a slight advantage, which I do not desire. Do I interpret your sentiments also?"

Balmaine bowed. He wondered what was coming.

"I've thought of a way out of the difficulty. Close by is a factory. The steam whistle for work to cease, goes at six o'clock. I suggest that at its sound we fire. Do you agree?"

"If it satisfies you—yes."

"Twenty paces—will that do?"

Balmaine was perfectly contented.

"Let's measure together, from this point."

The earl took a piece of billiard-chalk from his pocket, and drew a line on the floor.

"Let's start from here. We can toss for positions afterwards."

The earl looked at his watch.

"We have just three minutes. If you're satisfied your pistol is in order, we had better take up our positions."

He walked to the chalk-line on the south side. Lord Balmaine went to the north.

A dead silence for two minutes. Then, with a suddenness, a piercing vibration, almost a human note in the sound, penetrating Balmaine's nervous system to the very core, came the shrill note.

And at the same instant, the scream of a newsboy outside penetrated into the room. The earl's south position brought him near the window. He distinctly heard what the boy was howling. The word was "Murder!"

Mingled with the word was the prolonged steam whistle. The report of a pistol sounded—one report only. The upraised arm of the earl dropped. He swayed just once, and fell backwards.

That shriek of the newsboy had put him off at the critical moment. He had not had time to pull the trigger when Balmaine's bullet pierced his heart.

Pale as death, Balmaine ran forward, and, horror-stricken, gazed at the ashen face of his antagonist. One crimson spot, as big as half-a-crown, was conspicuous on the shirt front.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MASTER MIND

Was Lord Lanchester dead? If not, clearly Balmaine's duty was to go for a surgeon. Overcoming his repugnance, he placed his hand on the earl's chest, just above the blood spot. Not a heartbeat could he detect.

Horror-stricken, Balmaine sprang to his feet. Had he committed murder? No, no; it could not be. The fate of the earl might have been his. It was a fair fight; no one could say it was not.

Then he caught sight of the chalk-lines. These might excite suspicion. He would have to rub them out.

Then, with a face as white as his shirtfront, he stole down to the hall, and opened the door. Before he had time to close it, Leonie came from behind one of the pillars supporting the portico.

She clasped his wrist. Her grasp was like that of a vice.

"You've brought it off, then?" she breathed.

"Yes, Heaven help me!" he muttered.

"Nonsense! What has Heaven to do with it?" she answered fiercely. "No, don't shut the door. We may want to go in, and we haven't the key."

"Want to go in—for what purpose?" he faltered.

"I don't know," she answered, rapidly. "But it's best to be careful. We mustn't stand here. Let us go inside."

Balmaine was utterly nerveless. He felt as though whatever Lady Lanchester told him, he must do. He shrank back into the hall, and she followed him.

"Is he really dead?" she whispered in his ear.

"I think so," he forced himself to say.

"Tell me all about it," she went on, breathlessly. "What room did you fight in? Show it to me."

"But the earl's lying there. Surely——"

"I know—I know," she rejoined, impatiently. "That's why I want to see the room."

All this time they had been slowly ascending the staircase.

She left him when they were in the room, walked towards the body, bent over it, and looked keenly at the face. Then she returned to the young man, who was leaning against the doorpost, dazed and sickened.

"Yes, he's dead!" she said, in a hard voice. "What happened?"

Balmaine tried to tell her, but it was some little time before he could piece together a coherent story. But at last she was in possession of the facts.

"The earl missed you, then?" said she.

He started. Now that he came to think of it, he had only heard one report. Lord Lanchester could not have had time to pull the trigger.

"Where did the bullet go? That must be found, or it'll give away the idea of suicide," said she.

"I don't think he fired," returned Balmaine, huskily.

"Yes, you're right," said she. "The pistol is still undischarged. It must be fired, or how is the presence of the bullet in the body to be accounted for? We must take the pistol from him, fire it up the chimney, and replace it in his hand."

She did not wait for his assistance, but tried to wrench the pistol from the grasp of death. To her dismay, she was unable to do so.

"It won't be safe to leave him as he is. How is the *suicide* to be made evident?" said she.

"I understand," he returned, with a shudder; "but the pistol can be fired."

Leonie bit her lips, and was silent. Her alert brain was revolving all the possibilities.

"Take off your overcoat," said she, all at once, imperiously.

She took the coat, rolled it into a bundle, and placed it on the floor, in a line with the muzzle of the weapon. Then, placing her finger by the side of the finger of the dead man, she pulled the trigger.

"Do you see why I did that?" she said, in a triumphant tone. "You'll now be able to take away the bullet. Only one will be left behind—the one you placed in the earl's body."

"There's your coat. Take care you don't leave the bullet behind. It may drop out as you are putting on the ulster."

The countess was right. While he was putting his arms into the sleeves, the bullet went with a crack on to the floor, and rolled into a dark corner. He had to search for it, and while he was doing so, her deft

fingers went over the earl's pockets, with the dexterity of a practised thief.

She found a folded paper, and glanced at its contents. The earl had carried out his promise faithfully. The paper told how he had come to that house for the purpose of committing suicide. She also discovered what, to her, was of much greater importance—a bunch of keys.

Meanwhile, Balmaine had found the bullet, and Leonie, satisfied with what she had done, once more took his arm, and together they quitted the chamber of death.

CHAPTER XX

THE SECRET DRAWER

THREE days had gone over, when London was convulsed by the startling rumour, which is best expressed by the chief line on the posters of the papers published two days after the duel. It ran :—

"MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF THE EARL OF LANCHESTER."

This announcement was due to the countess herself, and in bringing it about, she acted with extreme coolness and deliberation. She did nothing, until the afternoon of the following day, when she summoned Lampiter, his lordship's man.

She looked up as the manservant entered, rose from her chair, and walked to the fire.

"Lampiter, you are in the earl's confidence; tell me where he is?"

"The earl went out last night, my lady, about seven o'clock, but he did not say where he was going."

Lady Lanchester continued, in a low, agitated voice :

"I know you've plenty of common-sense,

Lampiter, and can hold your tongue. I feel I can speak to you freely. Tell me, have you noticed anything strange about the earl's manner of late?"

"Well, my lady, since you put it that way, I must say that I don't consider his lordship has been quite himself the last two days."

"That's been my impression, too. As we both agree, it only shows that my opinion of you, Lampiter, was not erroneous. Oh, Lampiter, I have fears——"

"May I venture to make a suggestion, my lady? It perhaps might be well to make inquiries at his club."

"Yes, yes!" cried her ladyship, hastily. "That's an excellent idea. Go at once, please, Lampiter! Take a taxi and come back as quickly as you can."

Lampiter hastened away, decidedly perturbed by Lady Lanchester's evident anxiety. Directly he was gone, the handkerchief was put away. Fastening the door, she drew the bunch of keys she had taken from the dead body of the earl, and commenced a feverish search.

One of the pieces of furniture was a clumsy bit of old Dutch work, with drawers below and a cabinet for china above. The drawers had a bulging front, but when the centre drawer, where the bulge was most prominent, was drawn out, the inside of the drawer did not follow the outside line. It was perfectly straight. There was thus, apparently, a solid curve of wood, quite three inches at the widest part—ample space for a cavity.

Directly the countess saw this, her fingers went lightning-like over the surface.

Suddenly a click. She had found the spring! The flat, bow-shaped surface flew up, and the hollow space disclosed a folded paper. Trembling from head to foot, she spread it out on her knees, and her glistening eyes read the words:

"The last will and testament of Marmaduke, Earl of Lanchester, made April 5th."

April 5th was the day before. He must have written it just previous to his fatal visit to the house in Chesham Square. She read on:

"By this will, I hereby revoke all former wills. I now leave my wife, Leonie, Countess of Lanchester, a legacy of £1,000, but all my estate, real and personal, is to go to my cousin, the Hon. William Trevor, of——"

"A paltry thousand pounds!" she burst out. "So he meant to revenge himself, after all. But I've baulked him. Bah, the old idiot!"

She shut the secret drawer, and carried the will to her own suite of rooms. Here she threw it on the fire, and watched it flare up and smoulder into ashes. She awaited Lampiter's return.

He was away quite two hours, and came back with the intelligence that the earl had not been near his club since the previous morning, nor had any of his friends seen him.

"It is terribly worrying," she cried, clasping her hands, "especially after what we've both noticed."

"I didn't like to mention it before, my lady," said Lampiter, hesitatingly, "but his lordship called me and Parsons into his room yesterday afternoon, and said we were to witness his signature, as we did, and signed our own names. I don't know, but my impression is his lordship made his will."

"Oh, Lampiter!" cried her ladyship, in agonized tones. "Doesn't that confirm my fears? What am I to do?"

"Perhaps Scotland Yard——" hazarded the man.

"Not to be thought of. How can you make such a vulgar suggestion?" said the countess, sharply.

Leonie had a pretty shrewd idea what Lampiter would do. He had a "house of call" in one of the streets at the back of Park Lane, where he generally

met every evening other " gentlemen's gentlemen," and with them discussed the latest aristocratic scandal. The countess didn't doubt that in a few hours the news would be all over the town, and, of course, find its way to the newspapers. This was what she wanted.

Three vital questions were jostling each other in her brain. There was her future with Lord Balmaine Alec Helston's search for Max Barnard, and, lastly, the missing packet.

The packet persisted in obtruding itself into her thoughts. She looked upon Helston's frenzied narrative—how he had dug in the grave, where she had hidden it, and had been unable to find it—as utterly incredible. It was there, it must be there, she told herself, over and over again. Helston had dug in the wrong place, or had been so nervous he had missed it.

Just then came a knock at the door. She knew the tap; it came from the fingers of the new lady's-maid who had taken the place of the spiteful Adele. She had brought a letter, which had arrived by the last post.

She carelessly broke open the envelope, but directly her eyes fell on the contents, her expression changed. She stared at the writing as though it had hypnotised her. The letter ran thus :—

" Dear Lady Lanchester,—For your own sake, you had better come and see me. Say to-morrow night, at nine o'clock. Put off everything for this. I earnestly entreat you not to fail. The matter is of vital, of terrible, importance to you.—Yours, P. Carew."

There was an air of warning, of mastery, of sternness about this brief letter, which alarmed the countess.

" Whatever he means," she muttered, " I must go. The next morning, that which she expected had

happened—the news of the disappearance of the earl was in all the papers.

But she was still in a dilemma. She could not see a way of directing attention to the house in Chesham Square, and it was vitally necessary to her plot that the body of Lord Lanchester should be found.

Chance solved the difficulty.

About ten o'clock, a dapper clerk from the firm of agents who had the letting of the house called for the key, which he said he gave to his lordship two days before. An applicant wished to view the house, and without the key it was impossible to get inside.

Lady Lanchester, charmingly dressed, and looking romantic and lovely in her agitation, quite overpowered the dapper clerk. The key was nowhere to be found, she explained. The earl must have called and obtained it when he was out on some strange business from which he never returned.

"Your ladyship's quite right," said the dapper clerk. "His lordship called at our place at a little past five on Tuesday afternoon."

"This may be a solution of the mystery!" she cried. "It's certain the earl must have the key, and perhaps obtained it to—oh, you must break into the house, somehow! Please come back and let me know the result."

Within half an hour, a ladder was planted against the back of the house, and the dapper clerk and a couple of workmen climbed through one of the windows.

"Hallo!" called out the man who had first climbed on to the sill. "Here's a rum thing! The gas is burning!"

It was a puzzle, certainly, but it suggested nothing sinister. One by one they entered the room.

"Great Scott!" cried the first man. "Look there—on the ground. It's——"

He stopped as though he had been shot, and stood

rigid and motionless. His voice died away in his throat. He could only point to the ghastly object at the further end. A grey head, a huddled body, one outstretched hand, the fingers still folded round the butt-end of the pistol, but only lightly, for the *rigor mortis* had passed, and the muscles had become limp and flexible.

For two or three moments, the three scared men stood looking at one another, waiting for one of the other two to take the initiative. Then, apparently thinking there was safety in numbers, they advanced simultaneously, the dapper clerk, his teeth almost chattering, a little way ahead of the others, a terrible fascination urging him onward and overcoming his horror. He was the only one of the three who was likely to be able to identify the body, and a dreadful suspicion of what had happened seized him.

Griggs," he whispered, clutching the nearest man's arm, " this is a frightful business! It's either murder or suicide. The man lying there is Lord Lanchester!"

CHAPTER XXI

THROUGH THE SPY-HOLE

In the meantime, much had been going on in that queer, underground den over the Regent's Canal.

To begin with, Old Rag, the coiner and " snide pusher " (passer of bad money) had discovered Max Barnard's secret. He had caught sight more than once of the pouch, and saw how anxious Barnard was to conceal it. He was certain it contained something far more precious than tobacco. He determined to discover what was inside, and succeeded, by the very simple process of drugging the convict.

When Barnard was in a heavy, lethargic sleep, Rag stole into his room, took possession of the

pouch, and stared at the contents with open eyes and mouth.

"Well, I'm jiggered if it ain't a spark! Where's he got it from? But it can't be real. It must be a flash 'un. Anyhow, there's one man as'll know, and that's Alec Helston. But 'im and Max ain't friends. If Max once saw Alec, he'd go for 'im."

He replaced the pouch, and crept away to plan out what was to be done. The next thing was to arrange a meeting with Helston, who went white with excitement when he heard what Rag had to say.

He gasped for breath. Surely it was impossible that the diamond Barnard had in his possession could be *the* diamond. Yet when Rag described the india-rubber pouch and its peculiarities, there could hardly be a doubt.

But how could Barnard have got hold of it?

"I must have a sight of the thing. How can that be done? Can you sneak it?"

"I could if Max was a stiff 'un. Not else. I might get at it if I doped 'im. But what 'ud be the good? He'd go fur me when he woke and found the stone gone."

"What about just a drop or two too much dope?" said Helston, darkly. "D'you twig?"

"Not me," burst out the old man, with a shudder. "I'm not that sort. An' if I was, what should I do it fur? I ain't got no old score to work orf agen Barnard."

"If the stone were all right, it would pay you."

"Do it yerself, then, Alec, but not in *my* crib. See?"

"Oh, well, I'll think of some other way. Just now, a sight of the spark'll be enough for me. When can you bring it off?"

"When you plank down a bit of flimsy. Say a fiver."

Helston shook his head, and then followed a

haggle. Rag wouldn't give way, and at last, Helston agreed.

"It's a leap in the dark," he grumbled. "I'll bet any money the stone's a fake."

"P'raps, an' p'raps not. You know my terms. If you ain't sport enough to risk it, leave it alone. A fiver won't break yer. Yer look as if yer was in clover."

Helston was a dandy. No swell mobsman dressed better.

"Well, we won't jaw any more about it. Can you fix up the job to-morrow night?"

"Yuss. I'll have a try. If the dope works orl right it'll be safe fer yer to be here next mornin'."

"Righto. But mind this, I must handle the stone."

"Then yer won't, old son. All I can do is to let yer look through the spy-hole."

Helston growled, but gave in. He knocked at Rag's door in a fashion which told the old man who his visitor was, and was admitted at once.

"Is it all right?" he asked, anxiously.

"Yuss. Yer might fire a pistol close to his ear-hole an' it wouldn't wake him."

Down they went, through the secret entrance, and were in the lobby with the spy-hole, and here Helston was left. Looking through the hole, Helston could see the convict lying on his mattress as motionless as a log. Presently Old Rag appeared, and put his hand under the pillow, but what he wanted was not there. He then cautiously inserted his fingers within Barnard's vest, and drew out the pouch.

"By the living Jingo," muttered Helston, "I'm on the right track! It all depends upon what's inside."

He trembled with excitement while Rag was unfastening the clasp.

Old Rag had the stone in his fingers, and was turning it in various directions to catch the light.

Helston had difficulty in repressing a yell of impatience. Soon, however, Rag approached, and held the diamond close to the spy-hole. Every nerve in Helston's body was quivering, and he bit his lips to keep back an exultant cry. It was really *the* diamond —the biggest in the world.

"You're a precious long time, Alec," grunted Rag. "My arm's agettin' cramped. What is it—a fake?"

"A fake? Well, it may be. What I want to know is, how Max got hold of it?"

"Pinched some swell woman's jewel case in course. I guess he had to crack a crib or two afore he found his way to this 'ere den. What's it worth?"

"If it's real, p'raps five hundred quid."

Rag didn't seem impressed. Helston wondered if the old chap suspected anything. However, he said not a word, and Rag declaring that he was tired, and that at any moment Barnard might awake, as the dope was uncertain in its effects, the diamond was replaced in the pouch and the latter slipped inside the convict's vest.

Within a few minutes, the two were discussing the matter in the kitchen. Aggy slept in the room above, and they could hear her moving about. Helston let fall two or three oaths—to himself. The thought had flashed across his mind how easy it would be to get rid of Rag, and he once out of the way, there was nothing to prevent him dealing with Barnard in the same fashion. Such a chance might never occur again.

"It's like this, Rag, old chap. The stone's no good to you, and it's no good to Max. Directly you tried to turn it into money, you'd find the darbies on your wrists. Now I *can* wangle the biz. I've only to give certain people the tip and they'd part. I shall stick out for a hundred quid for you."

"Oh, then," put in Rag, quickly, his cunning little eyes gleaming, "it ain't a fake, arter all?"

"Didn't I tell you I couldn't tell unless I handled it?" retorted Helston, irritably. "Fake or not, it's worth getting hold of. Now this is the idea. Dope Max again, collar the stone, give Scotland Yard the wheeze, and back goes the beggar to Dartmoor, if the rope isn't round his neck before. It's on the cards."

Rag's thoughts took something like this course:

Of course, the convict could be drugged, and the diamond taken; but what then? The police would have to be introduced into his underground den. Why, that stronghold of his was worth any money! Here was all his coining apparatus, and here coining had been carried on with absolute safety for years.

He pointed this out to Helston, and wound up with demanding a thousand pounds. Helston could not believe his ears.

"You're talking out of your neck."

"Am I? What abart you? That spark worth only £500? Ten, twenty times that, I'll swear. I'm a-goin' ter give you the straight tip," snarled Rag. "I want some coin down on the nail afore I goes any furder. I ain't anybody's tame cat ter draw chestnuts out o' the fire for the monkey. See the p'int?"

Old Rag had put the case into a nutshell.

"How much do you want?" Helston asked, abruptly.

"Two-fifty quid—an' not a penny less."

"Look here, I'll try and raise twenty quid; but you won't get more."

"No," rejoined Rag, decisively. "Two hundred and fifty pounds down on the nail, or it's orl off. Yer needn't kid me wiv any o' your lies, Alec Helston. Yer can't cut the dash yer does wivout putting yer 'ands on the brass. I know you've got some swell mugs as yer can squeeze. Try yer lies on them."

"It's a beastly nuisance you can't trust me, Rag!"

he growled. "It'll delay the thing, and I wanted to bring it off sharp. Anyhow, I suppose if you stick out——"

"That's me," interposed Rag.

"Well, I can't decide off-hand. I'll think it over."

The result of Alec Helston's cogitations was the planning of a daring coup.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TEMPTATION OF CAREW

In the first-floor front office of one of the largest houses on the western side of Hatton Garden Peter Carew was reading an evening paper. His eyes were fixed upon the first column of the page where generally appeared the latest and most important news of the day. This article was headed:

"LORD LANCHESTER FOUND DEAD!"

"THE BODY DISCOVERED IN AN EMPTY HOUSE!"

"By Jove, what a strange thing! Leonie, of course, never cared for him. How could she? A man old enough to be her father! No, she married him for his money, and he's dead. Killed himself!"

He tapped his breast-pocket as he spoke. In his pocket-book he had a strange, a threatening missive, which had caused him to write so pressingly to Lady Lanchester, begging her to call upon him at nine o'clock that night.

She had not answered, and it was five minutes past the hour. Did not the newspaper explain the cause?

While he was trying to think, there came a sharp, imperious tinkling of the electric bell.

"It's she!" he muttered.

He opened the door.

"Ah," said he, in a voice of suppressed excitement, "I hoped it was you."

"What's the matter?" said she, in a low voice.

"I'll tell you upstairs!" he rejoined.

He expected to find her pale, worried, perhaps worn. Nothing of the kind.

She caught sight of the paper on the table, and her eyebrows were elevated slightly.

"I see you've heard. It's all over the town. But we needn't talk on that subject. What did you want to see me about?"

"Perhaps you'd better read this, first, and tell me what you think of it."

He took from his pocket-book a dirty piece of paper, on which were scribbled a few lines, in a villainous hand, and vilely spelt. It ran thus:

"Sir,—Seeing yu want yore dimond back, I beg to tel yu as I got sum hinformashun as may do it. likewise about that eskaped convick Max Barnard. Make a apintment, an I will tel yu somethink. Butt no traps or yu won't git nuthink off me. Rite to O. K., 26, Smith Street, Kopenhaging Fields, N."

There was no signature.

"When did you get this?" asked Leonie.

"Yesterday morning. I wrote to you and I wrote to the anonymous writer, asking him to call here at ten. It occurred to me you'd like to hear what he had to say. That was why I wanted you here at nine."

She stood motionless as a statute for a few seconds, and then, as if she had suddenly come to life, she put both her arms round his neck, and kissed him full on the lips.

"I believe you do really love me, dearest!" she whispered convulsively. "Yes, you're the only man in the world I can trust. In spite of what I seem to you, you still have faith in me. Oh, you're too, too good!"

Carew was not quite sure what he had done, save warn her; but what did that matter? The intoxication of that kiss made him lose his head entirely. Wild thoughts rushed through his confused brain. In an ecstasy of passion he strained her to his breast, and gave her kiss for kiss.

The office was separated from Mr. van Buren's room by a partition, and in this partition was a little window. Anyone standing in van Buren's room could see into Carew's office, and when the window was open a little way could hear all that was going on.

As the clock struck, Lady Lanchester glided into van Buren's office and took her place at the window.

She heard Carew descend the staircase; the turning of the key in the lock of the street door sounded unnaturally loud; the tramp of feet up the staircase seemed to hammer itself on her brain. The door opened.

Alec Helston!

Carew pointed to a chair, and Helston sat down. He wore a thick ulster, a bowler hat, and a woollen muffler round his neck.

"Are you the person who wrote to me?" asked Carew.

"Yes."

"Well, what have you got to say?"

"Just this. I know where the stolen diamond is, and if you offer me terms that are satisfactory, I can get it back for you."

"What do you call satisfactory terms?"

"Not less than £10,000."

"You'll never get that," said Carew, after a pause.

"Very well, then; you won't get the stone. Others are in the job besides myself, and they mean to have their share."

"Is Max Barnard one of your partners?"

A cunning gleam shot into Helston's eyes.

"You want to know too much!"

"Not at all. You mentioned him in your note," rejoined Carew, quickly.

"I know, and I'll throw him into the bargain. Plank down the money, and the spark and the man are yours."

"The matter will want thinking over. It doesn't rest with me to give a decision. You'll have to come here again for an answer."

"No," said Helston, brusquely. "This is my first and only visit. I'm not coming on a fool's errand, on purpose to be shadowed and trapped."

"Bah! You're but a clumsy negotiator. See here!"

He laid his hand on a small, brass knob.

"I have but to press this, and they instantly know at the nearest police-station that burglars are at van Buren, Pintos & Carew's offices. In a couple of minutes a constable can be here."

"But for all that," resumed Helston, "you won't see me again. I've made you the offer; you can give me your answer in the Agony column of the *Times*. If it's yes, then I'll let you know by letter how you're to send me the money and get the stuff. You won't run any risk, and you may lay your life *I* won't."

"Under what name shall I address you?" asked Carew.

"'Safety first.' The advert'll be in cypher, of course. I'll send you a code, and you can fix it up all right. I'll get now."

Carew accompanied Helston down the stairs. When the door was closed, he returned to his room. Leonie was there. He found her calm, composed, inclined to rally him.

"You'll pay that man his £10,000, and get your diamond back. You must, Peter dear, for my sake. I dread Max Barnard. He knows too much about me."

She laid her head on his shoulder, and fondled his cheek. His senses were swimming. A wild, delirious wish possessed him to fling aside everything, so long as he had her love and knew she was true to him.

"Leonie," he whispered, "I would do anything for you! You ought to know that already. Who is there in the world who possesses your secret but I? And so long as Max Barnard is in prison, you're free—freer than ever, now that the earl is dead."

A sudden thought darted through the woman's brain. She had, she felt, every reason to be amiable to Peter Carew. She smiled again—an enticing, an alluring, a Delilah-like smile. His arms tightened their grasp, as though he would hold her for ever.

"Leonie," he breathed, hoarsely, "I love you now as I've never loved you. I'll dare anything. Be my wife. I'll get the £10,000 somehow. Marriage with me is your only protection against the man you dread."

Leonie was silent for a brief space. She was taken by surprise. Carew's daring suggestion was not all to her taste. Her intention was to fly at much higher game. When a decent time had elapsed, she meant, in a sober and decorous fashion, to marry Lord Balmaine. She wanted to maintain her footing in the world of smart society, and as Lady Balmaine she would be able to do it.

But for the moment, Peter Carew held the trump card. She would have to finesse.

"Dear Peter," she murmured, in dove-like tones, "how good you are! I can refuse you nothing."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LANCHESTER HEIRLOOMS

THAT the Earl of Lanchester had committed suicide, few doubted, certainly not the coroner's jury. The

pistol found in his hand, the letter—of an absolute certainty in his own writing—discovered in his pocket, the evidence of Lady Lanchester and Lampiter, the valet, were considered proof positive.

Of course, the motive of the earl in putting an end to himself excited much curiosity. But there was no explanation beyond the assumption of mental derangement, and so a verdict that the earl had shot himself while in a fit of temporary insanity, was returned.

The new earl, the Hon. William Trevor, mentioned in the will found by Lady Lanchester and so discreetly destroyed by her, was present at the inquest, and saw the countess for the first time. Leonie, consistent to her policy of amiability, invited him to Park Lane to lunch. He accepted.

By the will of the earl, the whole of his fortune was left to his wife, Leonie, Countess of Lanchester; the estates, which were entailed, went with the title to the Hon. William Trevor, but not the house in Park Lane, which he bequeathed to his wife. Unless the new Earl of Lanchester had a private fortune, he would find Lanchester Court and the estates somewhat of a white elephant, for the rent roll scarcely yielded sufficient to keep up the property in a style worthy of the earldom.

There was the furniture also, and the pictures. Some of the pictures were heirlooms, and the earl mentioned the matter during luncheon to the countess.

"By all means take them," said Lady Lanchester, sweetly. "I suppose the lawyers know which they are, I don't."

"I've got a list here; but I expect they're nearly all at Lanchester Court. Well, then, there are the famous Lanchester diamonds and the other jewels. I don't imagine they're at Lanchester."

She had quite forgotten the famous Lanchester

diamonds. She had come to look upon them as her own, so much so that she had raised money on them, and had had a duplicate set made of artificial stones.

Alec Helston had helped her to do this with safety. There was nothing about diamonds that Helston did not know. He took the diamonds to a certain firm in Paris, famed for their workmanship and secrecy, facsimiles were manufactured, and her ladyship wore the spurious gems, confident that no one but an expert, and an expert well acquainted with the originals, could tell the difference.

The same firm who had made the facsimiles also advanced the money on the genuine stones, but with a condition. If they were not redeemed within a year, they were to become the property of the firm.

The death of the earl had come at a most opportune time. In a month, the year would be at an end, and already Lady Lanchester had, in imagination, spent £15,000 out of her fortune in the redemption of the diamonds, for which her soul hungered.

It had never occurred to her that the diamonds would go with the pictures and the estates, and the new earl's words stabbed her like a knife.

"Oh, but they *are* at Lanchester," said she, steadily. "Poor dear Marmaduke always kept them there, excepting, of course, on those state occasions when he allowed me to have them. You'll scarcely believe that I hardly know what they're like, so seldom did I get an opportunity of wearing them."

"Ah, then I shall perhaps be able to have them and the pearls, and the rubies as well, after the funeral," said his lordship, raising his pale, washed-out eyes. "Harvey and Rossiter have given me a list of the jewels as well as of the pictures, so if you don't mind, we'll go through them together, and then there will be no misunderstandings. I hate misunderstandings, don't you—especially family misunderstandings?"

"Oh, of course," said she, "if you're in such a hurry."

Directly he was gone, she sprayed her face and neck with eau-de-Cologne and threw open the window, as if to purify the room.

She lit a cigarette, and for a few minutes stood fronting the fire, thoughtfully gazing into its glowing depths. Then, going to the writing-table, she scribbled a note. It ran as follows:

"Dearest Aubrey,—I must see you to-night. Put off any engagements. Of vital importance. I will call at nine o'clock. With fondest love.—Leonie."

"Directly the funeral's over," she said to herself, half aloud, "I'll hurry up those sharks of lawyers, and get that quarter of a million into my own hands. Of course, they'll advance me something on account at once. Duvivier and Morand must be paid, and once more I'll have my diamonds. They ought to reset the stones free of charge, but I suppose the mercenary wretches won't!"

Duvivier and Morand were the firm in Paris who had the heirlooms in their possession.

She went to a cabinet, which was practically a safe, for beneath its outside layer of sandal-wood, was the hardest and finest steel, and took from it a jewel-case of considerable size. The mock diamonds, arranged as a pendant, lay glittering in their bed of purple velvet. She held them in her hand, and looked at them attentively.

"Who's to know the stones are not the real thing?" she muttered.

"That wretched threadpaper earl isn't married, and not likely to be. He's too mean. He'll never know," she went on. "The rubies, the pearls, and the rest are genuine, and he'll think the diamonds are, too. I'll risk it"—her eyes flashed, and she threw back her head—"yes, I'll risk it! If the fraud is discovered, I'll swear I knew nothing about it. My

late husband had a good many lady acquaintances before I married him; why shouldn't one of them have wheedled the jewels out of him, just to wear, and she changed the stones? Yes, I'll do it!"

Of course, to make good her words to the earl, she would have to make a journey to Lanchester Court, and deposit the jewels in the plate-chest where was kept the gold dinner-service with which the late earl's father entertained the "first gentleman in Europe," when on one memorable occasion, the Prince Regent stayed a week at Lanchester Court.

But this could be done on the morning of the funeral.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CYPHER ADVERTISEMENT

LEONIE'S maid had orders to bring the *Times* to her mistress's room every morning, and that day's issue was lying on a chair. Leonie seized it, and her eyes at once went to the Agony column.

"At last!" she cried, agitatedly.

Yes, there it was; but she was just as wise as before. The advertisement ran thus:

"Safety First.—Nffu nf po ibnqtufbe ifbui bu tmfwfo pdmpdl po gsjeb bu nif gmbhtubgg kbdl tusbxt dbtumf esjoh uif npofz xjui zpv boe dpnf bmpof j tibmm uifo ublf zpv up nif qumbdf xifsf uif nbo boe uif cpy bsf jo ijejoh. Jg zpv qmbz gbmtf zpvs mjgf jt uif qfobmux."

She at once dressed herself, and went out by the private entrance. Soon a taxi, with her ladyship inside, was flying eastward. It was five o'clock, and the diamond merchant's office closed at that hour. But Peter Carew often stayed later. No doubt she would catch him.

She was doomed to disappointment. The office was closed; the shutters were up. Repeated digs at

the ivory button of the electric bell brought no response. She returned home, feeling very vexed, and prepared for her visit to Balmaine.

A taxi took her to Mayfair. His lordship was at home, said the obsequious gentleman's gentleman. Would madame be so good as to follow him?

She was shown into a cosy little bachelor's den, fitted up in old English style, save as to the enormous Chesterfield, facing the fire. When the gentleman's gentleman had disappeared, with a bow of profound respect, another door opened, and Balmaine entered, white and flurried.

"Oh, Aubrey dearest, if you knew what a terrible day of anguish, of suspense, this has been for me! Not for one minute have you been out of my thoughts. You know I love you, and——"

A well-modulated sob, the droop of the long lashes on the cheek, and she gently subsided into his arms.

"Ah, dear, dear Aubrey! I know now that you love me," she murmured.

There was nothing Balmaine did or said that should have called forth this burst of amorous gratitude. Leonie had begun by fascinating him, had proceeded to puzzle, and had ended not only by making him afraid of her, but by giving him the unpleasant conviction that she had him underneath her foot. He had virtually become her slave.

"Of course I love you, Leonie," he faltered.

"Poor boy!" she murmured. "Let's sit down and have a chat over things. Now that the inquest is concluded, and it's been comfortably settled that the earl put an end to himself, we've nothing more to trouble us, have we? And it brings us closer together, doesn't it? Oh, we must never separate, Aubrey! And yet I'm silly to talk such nonsense. Of course, you'll marry some day."

"Never!" gasped the young nobleman, who at that minute dreaded the very name of women.

"Oh, yes, you will," said she, placing the end of a delicate rosy finger in the dimple in his chin. "Yes, you will; and I shall hate your wife!"

Something seemed to mount to the young man's brain and overpower every other feeling—prudence, common-sense, his own vows to break off this dangerous friendship. The delirium only lasted a few seconds, but long enough to permit him to utter the few words which the next instant he would have given worlds to recall.

"Not, surely, if that wife were yourself, Leonie!" he babbled.

"Oh, Aubrey—Aubrey! Ah, how happy you've made me!"

She impulsively pressed her lips to his, and while she was embracing him tenderly, a secret monitor was whispering in his ears:

"Fool—fool—thrice distilled essence of a fool!"

"We must be careful, Aubrey," said she, after a pause. "It will never do to let our names be coupled together just yet. Three months—six months, that will be time enough to announce our engagement, won't it?"

"Quite time enough," he rejoined, with alacrity.

"Don't be so eager for delay, or I shall think you're already repenting," said she, with a charming pout.

"Leonie—as if ever I should repent asking you to be my wife!"

"Very well, then, please kiss me, just to show your sincerity."

He obeyed. What else could he do?

"Aren't you anxious to know how the earl has left his money?" she asked, abruptly.

"Not at all. What does it matter? The Balmaine estates are, if anything, worth more than the Lanchester property."

"Oh, the Lanchester property doesn't trouble

me!" said she, a little contemptuously. "It all goes to the new earl. Everything which was not entailed comes to me. It was good of the old man to leave me a quarter of a million ready money. The worst of it is the lawyers are so slow, and I'm told it's doubtful whether I shall have control of my money before six weeks or a couple of months. In the meantime, I want £15,000. Can you lend it to me?"

Lord Balmaine drew a long breath. Leonie was certainly beginning to appreciate her new position.

"Now that I'm to be your wife, Aubrey, I'm not going to keep any secrets from you."

"When I borrowed the £2,000 of you, which led to everything that has happened since, I didn't tell you how much I owed. Of course, as the cheque you gave me was lost or stolen, I couldn't pay off my most pressing debts. Well, there are others—altogether, it's over £10,000—but, of course, I want ready money as well. I'm going to be horribly business-like. I shall give you an acknowledgment—a—what do you call it, when you write something on a piece of paper, and somebody whose name is on it promises to pay in three months?"

"Do you mean a bill?"

"Yes," said her ladyship, with an air of relief. "I'll give you a bill for three months, and— "

"Good Heavens, Leonie, what are you suggesting?" in a tone of offended pride. "I'm not a money-lender. You shall have the money. I'm quite satisfied with your word."

"Oh, you dear! Can you arrange it at the end of a week? To-morrow I go to Lanchester for the funeral, and probably shall stay a day or two. I've business to transact with the new earl."

Now that she could see herself practically in possession of the £15,000 with which to redeem the diamonds in Paris, she suddenly became aware of the

proprieties, looked at her watch, and gave a little shriek of alarm when she discovered it was so late.

"I shan't see you again for three whole days!" she cried, with one of her favourite pouts. "It will seem like three centuries!"

An affectionate adieu, and she hurried away, leaving Balmaine almost wishing that it had been he, and not the Earl of Lanchester, who had received the fatal bullet.

When Leonie reached home, she found, as she expected, a letter from Peter Carew.

"I have the key to the cipher, and have already made out what it means," he wrote. "Come early to-morrow morning—nine o'clock, if possible, before business begins—then we can talk quietly. I am longing to see you. Of course, I understand the inquest business must have cost you much anxiety and taken up your time; still, the briefest letter in the world—only one line—would have put joy in my heart. I shall never forget your words. You said: 'Dear Peter, I can refuse you nothing!' Do you remember?"

Leonie burst into a hard, mirthless, metallic laugh.

"Poor Peter! I'd quite forgotten I promised to marry him! It's too funny! But he deserves a snub for his impertinence. As if I cared for him—as if I ever did care!"

CHAPTER XXV

LEONIE'S MIDNIGHT QUEST

LEONIE dressed herself unobtrusively, as she always did when she visited Carew, and was soon speeding to Hatton Garden. The funeral at Lanchester Court was at two, and she would have to be there at one, at the latest, to restore the jewels to the plate-chest. Still, it could be done.

"I can only give you a quarter of an hour, Peter. I must be at Lanchester Court by one o'clock. The funeral takes place there, you know."

"Yes, of course. The inquest proved to be a very simple affair. I'm glad of it."

"Simple affair!" she retorted, sharply. "Why not? Who expected it to be anything else?"

"Oh, well, people were speculating about it a good deal. Now for this advertisement. The fellow selected quite an elementary system for his cypher. It'll be a wonder if some of those clever people who pass their time in wrestling with puzzles don't solve it without the key. See, you simply shift the alphabet back one letter and you have the whole thing. Take 'f,' as 'e,' and so on, and it's easy enough. Now then, for the entire message. Here it is:

'Meet me on Hampstead Heath, at eleven o'clock on Friday, at the flagstaff, Jack Straw's Castle. Bring the money with you, and come alone. I shall then take you to the place where the man and the stone are in hiding. If you play false, your life is the penalty.'"

"So that's the arrangement, is it?" she exclaimed. "And what are you going to do? Have you got the £10,000?"

"Yes. I've talked Christopher Pintos and van Buren, my partners, into finding the bulk. £2,000 of the amount is my own contribution."

"As I understand the thing, you take the money with you; but I presume you won't hand it over until this fellow, whoever he may be, satisfies you?"

"No fear! I shall go armed. If it's a trap, it'll be the other fellow, and not me, who'll fall into it."

Lady Lanchester darted a keen glance at Carew. Was he boasting?

"Peter," said she, abruptly, "what's to prevent this being a plan to rob you of £10,000?"

"I've thought of that. I shall be on my guard."

"No doubt, but what about this man the fellow's going to take you to, and who's supposed to have the diamond? Who's he?"

"The escaped convict, Max Barnard, of course."

Leonie laughed, scornfully.

"How on earth could a convict get hold of it?" she asked.

"It sounds a bit fishy, I admit. Still, it's not beyond possibility. Barnard had made his escape from Dartmoor four days before our man was robbed and murdered. If matters had been carefully planned beforehand, there was time for him to get to Parkeston and do the deed."

"That's a tall order," returned Leonie. "I can't accept it. There's no evidence he was ever at Parkeston, but it's beyond doubt that he was at Lanchester. What took him there?"

"How can I tell? Anyhow, to my mind his being at Lanchester is strongly in favour of the supposition that he was also at Parkeston."

"Is it? How do you make that out?"

"The mode of murder was the same, in both cases. It was of too extraordinary a character to be a mere coincidence."

"You may be right," she rejoined, in an indifferent tone. "Neither the one or the other interests me. Let's get back to the big diamond. What do you propose to do?"

"I'm bound to keep the appointment, and see what happens."

"Yes, I suppose that's the only thing. On Friday is it? And this is Tuesday. I shall return from Lanchester directly the funeral's over and look you up on Friday. Good-bye, dear boy, I can't stay a minute longer."

A motor car was awaiting her at Lanchester station, and her progress through the little town gave her the utmost satisfaction.

She was dressed with exquisite taste, and the whole troupe of servants, who were ranged in two lines in the spacious hall.

After being unrobed by her maid, Lady Lanchester descended to the library, where light refreshments were in readiness to support the grief-stricken mourners—consisting of a few of the principal gentry—when they arrived. She summoned the butler.

"Jarvis," said she, "the lawyer will be here with the earl a little before two. He will probably wish to go through the plate. It has to be handed over to him."

"Yes, my lady."

"Do you have a key of the plate-chest?"

The butler drew himself up with conscious pride.

"Certainly, my lady. I am responsible for the heirlooms, the plate, and the jewels. But I never open the plate-chest unless a member of the family is present."

"I see. Very proper. I needn't say that I should like to see that everything is safe and in good order before the lawyer comes. Will you take me to the strong-room?"

Jarvis would only be too happy. Deferentially he preceded her ladyship to the foot of the broad staircase, where he stood aside to allow her to pass.

"The second corridor to the right, my lady, on the first landing," said he, with an obsequious bow.

This second corridor was really a narrow passage, at the end of which was the door of the strong-room. The strong-room was partly built into the wall of the house. The butler unlocked the door, and pushed it slowly back. It was very heavy and moved but slowly.

The walls of the strong room were lined with shelves, where various valuables were deposited. The japanned boxes, with names outside in white letters,

contained deeds and documents relative to the various estates.

While the butler was on his knees fumbling at the lock of the plate-chest, Leonie deftly drew from the folds of her dress the jewel-case, and noiselessly deposited it on one of the shelves.

The butler threw back the massive lid, and disclosed the contents—the plates, the dishes, the salvers, the goblets, the cups, all carefully arranged, each in its groove. In the centre was a vacant space. Here should have been the jewel-case.

The strong-room was not well lighted, and for a moment or two, Jarvis thought his eyesight had deceived him. He could not believe the jewel-case was gone. He stooped down, put his hand inside, and rose to his feet, looking rather queer.

"The jewels, your ladyship? I—I don't think the earl brought them back. I remember the earl taking them away, and can your ladyship tell me anything about them?"

"Indeed I can't, excepting that I distinctly remember the earl telling me he had restored them to the strong-room."

Jarvis nervously cast his eyes around, and at last saw the case where Leonie had deposited it.

"You're quite right, my lady—quite right. But it oughtn't to be put there. Its proper place is in the chest. How his lordship came to be so careless—begging your pardon—I can't make out."

About a quarter to two, the invited guests began to assemble; and the earl, having arrived, assumed quite the air of the master of the house, which, indeed, was his real position.

The handing over of the heirlooms was a mere formality. Everything was absolutely correct and in order. The cautious old lawyer counted the jewels—quite as a matter of form, said he—and when he came to the thirteen diamonds and fingered them,

and peered at them through his spectacles and admired their brilliancy, Lady Lanchester nearly laughed in his face.

A solemn dinner-party concluded the evening, and Lady Lanchester, on the plea of a headache, retired early. By eleven Lanchester Court was in silence.

About midnight, a ghostly figure stole noiselessly along the dark corridors and down the staircase to the library. One of the bookcases turned on a pivot from its place in the wall, and behind was a secret door. Through this door her ladyship crept. She held something close to her, beneath her jacket.

The " something " which Lady Lanchester held, looked like an ordinary music-case. It, however, contained no music, as could be seen when her ladyship, having arrived at the gate leading to the churchyard, opened the case, and took from it a delicately-fashioned spade, long in the blade, and pointed.

How had she reached the outside of the mansion? Simply by traversing a secret passage, which led from the door behind the bookcase in the library. There was nothing about Lanchester Court she did not know.

The passage from the library led to a grating just outside the wall, and apparently placed there for drainage purposes. It did, in a way, serve this object, but this was only subsidiary. The grating opened with a spring, which the earl showed her how to manipulate.

The night was moonless, and she was wearing black. Her figure was almost invisible. Her destination was the resting-place of the Rev. Maurice Bradley.

But, on arriving at the grave, she found herself face to face with a most disquieting discovery. The mound of earth had been removed, and replaced with a slab of stone on brick supports. Had the packet remained where she had put it, it must have been

discovered by the workmen in digging the foundations. But what if Helston had been there beforehand?

"He's got the diamond. He made out to Peter he had. I thought at first it was a fairy tale, but I can see now that for once in his life he spoke the truth. His dodge is plain enough. He prefers £10,000 hard cash to risking what the diamond might fetch when it is safe to put it on the market. The mean, contemptible hound, to treat me so shabbily."

Had she been an ordinary woman, she would have shed tears of mortification; but tears never came to the eyes of Leonie, Countess of Lanchester, and so, with her white lips tight and rigid, and the line deep between her dark brows, she crept back to the house and entered by the grating.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE KEYHOLE TARGET

HELSTON'S *coup* which he hoped to bring off was partly bluff. He had not the diamond of course. He wanted first to make sure of his ground before he plunged into the crime which his offer to Carew rendered necessary.

He had completely thrown over the countess. All he cared for was to hand the stone to Carew, and once he had the £10,000 to take flight to America. Rag and Barnard presented no difficulty. If the coup ended successfully, both would be out of the world. Aggy was the only obstacle, but he knew she was out all day selling flowers, and he had only to select a suitable time for his projected visit to the den in Seward Street.

"I've had enough of Leonie," he muttered. "She frightens me. By heaven, there's nothing

that woman would stick at! I swear she'd do for me, if she found out the little game I'm playing just now. Anyway, if I can once put my hand on that ten thou., she can go to the deuce!"

It was about midday when he knocked at the door of 21, Seward Street—just three, distinct taps. Old Rag received him.

"I thort yer'd come," said the coiner, in his usual gruff way. "I wanted to see yer."

"Well, what about it, you old 'snide-pusher'?" said Helston, in a would-be jocular tone. "What's the matter now?"

"Jest this. I'm a-goin' ter give yer the straight tip. I ain't a-goin' to move a step if it ain't cash on the nail."

"And you're going to have it, you old fool. I've the rhino in my pocket now. But I want to be sure of the bearings of the place first. I want to have another look at Max."

"What fur? You've seen him once—ain't that enough?"

"No. He was doped then. I want to know what he looks like when he isn't."

"I don't like it," said Rag, uneasily. "He's got eyes like a 'awk's, and ears like a 'are's."

"Bah! Do you suppose I don't know the burglar's cat-tread? Haven't I cracked a crib or two in the old days? Ask me another," retorted Alec, loftily. "If you haven't got any 'corks,' I'll take off my shoes."

Rag saw that he was not to be dissuaded, and grumblingly yielded. They descended into the kitchen.

"The deep-laid schemes of mice and men, aft gang agley," and Helston, unmindful of this possibility omitted to ascertain whether Aggy was in the house. As a matter of fact, she was. Not feeling up to the mark, she had taken a day off. The girl was at the

window when Helston approached the house, and she heard him enter. Instantly she was on the alert. She felt convinced that his visit boded no good to Max Barnard.

Softly as the two men intended to tread, they could not move more noiselessly than Aggy, who, directly the two men quitted the room, ran down the stairs and followed them.

A very ordinary, harmless-looking copper was built up in a corner of the back kitchen. Such a thing is to be seen in hundreds of London houses of the old-fashioned kind. This copper was a little larger than usual; this was its only peculiarity.

When, however, Rag lifted out the copper itself, and a perpendicular shaft, nearly two feet wide, with an iron ladder attached to the wall, was disclosed, it was evident there was a difference between this copper and others.

It was, of course, the approach from the house to the underground apartments where Rag carried on his trade of coining, and where Barnard was hiding. The ventilating-shaft from the queer room led into the chimney of the copper.

"Dashed if you haven't got a snug arrangement here——" Helston was beginning, when Rag stopped him with an angry whisper.

"Shut up, yer fool!" he breathed. "Didn't I tell yer as Max's got the ears of a 'are? You'll give the show away in two twos if yer go abart shoutin' like a mad bull. Look 'ere, I'll go on an' 'ave a talk wiv Max while you 'ave a spy at 'im."

Helston took particular note of the way Rag manipulated the lock of the door communicating with Barnard's den. He saw there was a trick by which the bolt of the lock was shot back, and used as he was to all the secrets of the locksmith's trade, he grasped the method at once.

Leaving Helston with his eye fixed to the spy-hole,

Rag entered the little wooden room. Helston could scarcely see the convict for the cloud of tobacco-smoke. Max Barnard was lying on his bed enjoying his pipe.

"What cheer, matey? 'Ow yer gettin' on?" said Rag.

"A bit sick of these four walls. Not much better than No. 44 cell at the Dartmoor Hotel."

"I've done my best for yer, anyway, yer can't say I ain't," said Rag.

"I don't want to say it. I know it was risky, your taking me in, and what I've paid you isn't enough. It was all I'd got, and you've had every farthing. It's about time I shifted. I can't be living on you for ever."

"Don't yer tork like that. While I've got a crust, 'arf of it's yours," said Rag. "You're safe enough 'ere and snug enough. Why should you want to clear out?"

"Because I don't like the place; because it's too much like a prison cell; because I can't stand that spy-hole. What's it there for?" he demanded, abruptly.

Rag shivered. He thought he had contrived that spy-hole so cunningly, no one inside the cell could find it out.

Rag did not know how sensitive a convict, in a strange, unnatural life of solitude, silence, and horrible monotony, becomes.

"It was there afore I lived 'ere," said Rag. "If yer don't like it, I'll bung it up."

"You'd better," rejoined Max, shortly. "How d'you think I've been amusing myself while I've been down here?"

"How should I know?" said Rag, a strange feeling of disquietude creeping over him.

"I got Aggy to buy me a pea-shooter and a pint of peas, and I've practised for hours and hours, with

that cursed hole as a target. I've become so handy, I don't miss the mark once in a dozen times."

He had paused a second before saying this, and inserted two or three peas into his mouth.

"Look here," said he, suddenly—"ten to one on a bullseye."

Before Rag knew what he was about to do, Barnard had whipped out a peashooter from underneath the pillow, and had put it to his mouth.

Swish! the pea shot through the tube. A smothered cry of pain.

"Humph!" said Barnard, coolly. "I thought some skunk had got his peeper glued to that hole. Who was it, Rag?"

"I—I don't know," muttered Rag.

"You're not much hand at a lie, Rag," rejoined the convict, contemptuously. "Bring in the spy, and let's look at him."

"There ain't nobody, Max. I'll take me oath. It's your fancy. You've been a-broodin' over things till you've got a little barmy."

"All right. If you won't fetch him in, I will."

"The insect's crawled away," said he, with a shrug of the shoulders. "You'd better clear out, too."

Rag didn't want a second bidding. Muttering something apologetically, he shuffled away. Barnard heard him shoot to the bolts on the other side of the door.

"The slimy old grey rat!" muttered Barnard. "So the game was to bring a 'tec, to identify me, was it? That 'tec will have to turn up police work. A 'tec with one eye—it's too funny! Ho, ho! I never went straighter the mark than I did then. Double-shotted, too. That girl, Aggy, was right. She said there was something in the wind. All right, I'll do a bunk into the canal. The tunnel isn't more than half-a-mile from end to end. I can swim a mile."

He made preparations for quitting his voluntary

prison. The first thing he did was to bolt the door leading to the secret way to the house above. This door had fastenings on both sides.

He had sometime ago resolved to leave the den, and this resolve had been hastened by Rag's visit. Aggy, the flower-girl, had taken a fancy to him. His interference to protect her from the brutality of her father had strengthened her affection. She would do anything to serve the hunted man. Of course, she believed Helston was a detective. She told Barnard her suspicions.

All was ready, and he went down on his knees to open the trap which led to the canal, when he heard a soft, rhythmic knocking at the door he had bolted. He knew this peculiar knock—it had been arranged between him and Aggy. The girl was outside.

CHAPTER XXVII

GONE!

THOUGH time was of importance, yet Barnard went to the door. He dragged back the bolts. Aggy, pale, breathless, her hair dishevelled, staggered in.

"Make haste!" she panted, hoarsely, "they're a-coming downstairs!"

"Who's coming?"

"Farver and the bloke as is wiv 'im."

Barnard was not to be hurried. He looked up quickly, and fixed his eyes on the agitated girl.

"Who's the cove? A 'tec?"

"Yus. An' it looks as if you had blinded of him. I was hid in the kitching when he rushed by—a-howling and a-swearing orful. He got 'is 'andkercher to his eye. I follered him, to see what 'is gime was, and I see 'im go to his ulsterer, as he chucked orf and left in the parler, an' he drawed out 'is revolver. Oh, do make haste!"

Aggy's voice trembled, and she laid her hands pleadingly on the convict's arm.

Max Barnard had not moved. A strange, saturnine, hard look stole over his face. Aggy, meanwhile, stood palpitating, her fingers quivering with excitement, her face flushed, her lips parted, and her big eyes gleaming.

Footsteps were heard in the distance. Helston was descending the ladder. He was reckless, maddened. He was thirsting for the blood of the man he hated. He was suffering excruciating agony, and this agony was mental, as well as physical. He feared he was blinded, and, apart from the calamity of the loss of the sight of one eye, he saw his success with women would be over for ever. What woman would look with favour on a man who was half blind? He was disfigured for life.

Aggy's sense of hearing was not so keen as Barnard's but she heard Helston approach as plainly as did the convict.

"'Go—go," she breathed, convulsively. "I'll 'elp yer to get up the trap!"

As she spoke, she rushed to the iron trapdoor. She knew perfectly well the trick of opening it, and in a flash it was thrown up, and the square, black chasm below disclosed.

Barnard did not move. There was something strange in Aggy's story which made him think it was no detective who had been watching him.

Swiftly he turned towards the excited girl, and, in a whisper which sounded almost like a hiss, said:

"Did your father call this fellow by any name?"

"What's it matter?" retorted the girl. "Why don't yer clear out now you've got the chance?"

"Not me—not till you've answered my question. What's his name? Out with it, if you know it!"

"Oh," answered Aggy, in a sort of desperation, "I know his name right enough! It's 'Elston.

That's what farver calls 'im sometimes. When 'e doesn't say 'Elston, it's Alec."

The next moment she wished she had held her tongue. Barnard became like a man transformed into a maniac.

"It was that skunk, was it?" he shouted, throwing up his arms. "Then, by Heavens, I'll stay and get my own back!"

"No, no, you shan't!" cried the girl, trying to push him towards the open trap. "You've put 'is eye out! Ain't that enough for yer?"

At the same moment, something she had in her hand she thrust into his pocket.

"Right you are!" he whispered, his manner suddenly changing. "You're a trump, Aggy! Goodbye! I shan't forget you!"

Barnard lowered himself through the trap, and Aggy let fall the iron door upon him. At the same moment a report came from the direction of the spy-hole, and the girl uttered a cry of pain. A bullet from Helston's revolver, the barrel of which he had thrust through the aperture, had struck her shoulder.

"Winged him, by Jove!" he muttered, a triumphant smile curving his thin lips for a moment. "With five shots left, I oughtn't to be afraid of the hound! I'd like to see him die! I hope it'll be a slow death! I'll take my time over the other five shots."

Cautiously the murderous scoundrel crept to the door of the room and felt for the bolts. To his amazement they were drawn. They had been left so by Barnard when he went in search of the supposed 'tec.

"What the deuce does this mean?" he muttered. "Old Rag told me he'd fastened the fellow in safely."

He had such a fear of the convict that, although he firmly believed the latter had been rendered helpless by his shot, yet he did not for some seconds dare to

open the door. He suspected Barnard was lying in wait for him.

Then, summoning his courage, he flung the door open, suddenly, with the idea of taking Barnard by surprise.

He started back in amazement. Instead of seeing the convict lying helpless, he saw instead Aggy's insensible form.

"I'm dashed!" he ejaculated.

Then came a string of oaths, more or less emphatic. After this, he yelled for Old Rag to give him an explanation.

"Do you see that?" cried Helston, gripping Rag's arm. "Your cursed daughter's sold us! Didn't you know she was in the house?"

"I give yer me word," rejoined Rag, shaking from head to foot. "I didn't! I'll pay her out, though, the lying, sneaking jade! She's never been worth a cuss ter me!"

The old wretch strode to where Aggy was lying, with the intention of striking her, when he caught sight of a streak of blood on her arm. He recoiled.

"See this?" he whispered. "You've bin and shot her!"

"Serve her right!" muttered Helston. "Don't let us waste time over a girl. Where's the pouch? Perhaps he hasn't taken it with him."

Frantically they searched the room, and when they discovered that not only the convict, but the pouch with the diamond, had slipped through their fingers they stood still, staring at each other.

"Where's he gone?" demanded Helston, sharply.

"Where we can't foller 'im," rejoined Rag, sullenly. "Inter the canal, o' course."

"What then? How far would he have to swim before he reaches the tow-path?"

"We're just about the centre—a quarter of a mile each way."

"He's bound to come out at one end or the other," said Helston, quickly.

"Certainly he is."

"Very well, then, if you go to one end and I to the other, we'll nab him."

"Righto!" was the reply. "If that's your game, we'd better lose no time. 'Arf a mo. I'll just see what damage you've done the gal."

He bent over Aggy, and saw that the blood had come from a wound in the shoulder, and that no vital injury had been inflicted.

"She won't 'urt where she is," said he, at last.

The two callous wretches hurried away, ascended to the kitchen, and settled the question of position. Helston selected the Caledonian Road end of the canal, and Rag was to take his station at the Islington end.

"Have you got a pistol?" asked Helston.

"Have I got a pistol?" snorted Rag. "Of course I have!"

"Then you had better take it with you. See here. Directly you see the beggar's head appear above the water, fire at it. Do you understand?"

"I understand," returned Rag, harshly.

Rag trudged along through Barnsbury, across the Barnsbury Road, traversed Chapel Street, and finally arrived at Coolebrook Row, where the canal makes its appearance.

He entered Vincent Street, and finally took up his position on the towing path close to the tunnel, and, crouching down, awaited the result.

Then Rag saw a round, bullet-shaped object emerge from the tunnel, and the daylight fell on the white, upturned face of the convict, livid in hue, grotesque in its form.

With a violent effort, Barnard scrambled up the bank, and with the water dripping from his clothes, giving him a strange slimy, eel-like look, he stood

within a dozen feet of Old Rag, evidently hesitating what to do next.

The convict put his hand in his pocket. His intention was to turn his pocket inside out. His right hand came in contact with a square object. It was the purse Aggy had given to him.

"That girl's one of the best," he muttered. "I remember now, she shoved this into my pocket."

He opened the purse, a cheap, common affair enough, and found in it nearly nineteen shillings—representing Aggie's savings.

"Poor kiddie," he thought. "I wonder how I can make it up to her? Anyhow, just for the moment it is a godsend."

Old Rag, who had followed at a safe distance, saw him stop and count some money out of a purse into his hand. Then he seemed to hesitate.

"Where's he got them dibs from?" muttered the old coiner. "Dashed if it ain't Aggy's purse! I'm blessed! I s'pose the little fool's spooney on him. Just like all the women, allays a-fixing their 'arts on the wrong man."

Barnard went towards the City Road, and turned eastwards, keeping along the bye streets. He could see nothing for it but to walk until his clothes dried upon him, and risk being chilled to the bone.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A BOMBSHELL FROM THE SOLICITORS

LEONIE remained a few days at Lanchester Court. She would have liked to assert her position as its future mistress, but this was out of the question. Its owner was now the new earl, and she was simply a visitor.

On her return to Park Lane Leonie went through

the pile of correspondence. She looked for a letter from Peter Carew. It was as follows:—

"Your ladyship will not forget the appointment is for to-night."

"Forget!" she murmured, drawing a long breath. "I am not likely to forget *that!*"

One letter she left to the last. The writing was stiff and formal. On the flap of the envelope were the words, "Harvey and Rossiter."

The contents of the letter were disquieting. Mr. Harvey simply wrote that he purposed calling upon Lady Lanchester that morning, about midday, as he wished to discuss with her a matter of some importance.

It was then a quarter to twelve. The lawyer, she knew, was one of the most punctual of men.

Presently Mr. Harvey was announced. He entered —a thin, tall, angular man, of about sixty.

"Are you aware, Lady Lanchester," the solicitor began, without any preface, "that the late earl made a will subsequent to the one I drew for him?"

"No, indeed. Where is it? Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because I didn't know. The information only came to hand a few days ago."

"Well, I hope you won't keep me in suspense. If this second will concerns me, I ought to be told at once. Is there much difference between it and the one in your possession?"

"I'm unable to say. I'm in entire ignorance of its provisions. The facts appear to be these. A few hours before his mysterious death, the earl called Lampiter, his man, and Parsons, another servant, into his room, and asked them to witness his signature to a document which he told them was his will. They did so, and signed their names, in legal form, each in the presence of the other. But——"

He paused.

"Well, please go on. Can't you see, Mr. Harvey, I'm all anxiety?"

"This will has disappeared. The question is, what has become of it?"

"A search must be made at once. It *must* be found—if it's in existence. The earl may have destroyed it himself. My poor husband, in his last hours, was not responsible for his actions."

"I quite agree with your ladyship that a search should be undertaken. If the document is anywhere, it is in this house."

"Then, please, lose no time in settling the matter. I give you a free hand."

"Thank you. Meanwhile, I ought to tell you that if the search be unsuccessful, we shall have to go to the Court of Chancery for instructions. That will mean a considerable delay in proving the first will, and, of course, we must withhold any payments until the Court gives us authority."

"Does that mean I can't have the £5,000 which I need so urgently?"

"I'm afraid it does."

"May I ask if you're acting according to your own ideas, or has the earl instructed you?"

"His lordship is naturally interested in the matter," said Mr. Harvey smoothly.

"And do you accept the word of Lampiter and Parsons as gospel truth?"

"We're bound to inquire into the matter. It is, however, for the Court to settle."

"Oh, very well. Do as you like, only be quick about it. You're at liberty to go into every room in the house. Perhaps you'd like to commence this very minute. Anyhow, I must ask you to excuse me. Good-morning, Mr. Harvey."

She had arranged to meet Peter Carew that night, at Hampstead Heath Station. They were to confer together, and go separately to the spot fixed by Alec

Helston—namely, the flagstaff near Jack Straw's Castle.

She found Peter Carew awaiting her. He was cool and self-possessed, as he ever was.

She was the first to utter a word.

"Are you certain this man will keep his appointment?"

"I know nothing to make me think he will not. But, Leonie, why do you wish to come? There may be great danger. I have thought it wise to be prepared. I've my revolver in readiness. I should never forgive myself if you came to harm through me. You know what you promised—once the diamond's in my possession, I realise my share in the sale of the stone, and you'll be my wife."

"And my promise holds good," she said. "But this is not the time for talking over our plans of happiness. I want to know what you intend to do when this man meets you."

"How can I say? It all depends what he proposes. You, of course, mustn't be seen."

"Oh, the night's dark enough, and there are plenty of places where I can conceal myself and watch."

The time of the appointment passed, an hour went by, and no one appeared. Another half-hour, and Carew began to think he had been fooled. Suddenly he felt the touch of a soft hand. It was Leonie.

"What's the use of waiting here any longer?" said she.

"It looks like a beastly fraud," returned Carew. "Never mind, you go and leave me here. I should never forgive myself if I lost this chance of getting back the diamond."

"Dear boy," she whispered, and there was just a suspicion of banter in her voice, "you are too trustful—you always were, you know. But I'll go, if you'll come with me. I am tired of sticking in this lonely place. Besides, I feel horribly chilly and hungry.

Make up your mind, dear old boy, that you've been had."

"I begin to think you're right," answered Carew, despondently. "I shall look like an ass when I present myself to van Buren to-morrow. Just fancy! I've got ten thousand pounds in bank-notes upon me."

Ten thousand pounds, within a foot, nay, less than that, for she had her arm insinuated inside Carew's and her deft fingers could feel the outline of his pocket-book!

"Don't worry about it, dear old chappie! Let's get right away to town and have some supper!"

The words touched a tender chord in his memory. Leonie had, he thought, never been more seductive than at that moment. No doubt she was right as to his having been fooled.

The supper, the champagne, the brilliantly-lighted room, the general air of luxury, the handsome women, their elegant dresses, all assisted in chasing away Carew's dismal thoughts.

A portly, somewhat vulgar fellow, rudely pushed against them, forcing a way for the over-dressed woman on his arm. Peter was wedged against the wall, Leonie close, very close, to him.

"Dearest Peter," she whispered, "I'm so sorry this thing has been a fizzle. Never mind! Perhaps you'll get the diamond back in some other way. Good-night, darling boy, I'll have this cab. No, you must not come with me. You forget that only the other day I buried my dear husband."

The light, bantering tone of her ladyship jarred upon him. He wished she had not uttered the contemptuous words. But the ravishing smile she gave him, and the warm pressure of the hand, chased away his unpleasant thoughts, and he stood on the pavement, assisted her into a taxi, and stood for a few

seconds watching the cab losing itself in the stream of traffic.

Then he turned to walk slowly home. Suddenly he thought of his pocket-book, and hurriedly he put his hand to his breast.

It was gone!

CHAPTER XXIX

ESCAPING FROM THE NET

By the time the taxi had arrived at Park Lane, Leonie had decided to go to Paris the next day and redeem the Lanchester heirlooms. Circumstances quite unexpected would enable her to do so. She let herself in by her private door, and no one in the house was any the wiser. Packing a small handbag, to be in readiness for her journey in the morning, she snatched a few hours' sleep as she had to get up at seven.

At half-past nine, a cab put her down at Charing Cross. She walked leisurely to the Continental booking office. Just in front of her was a gentleman's servant. She caught sight of his profile, and knew him at once. It was Lord Balmaine's man.

She heard the man take two tickets for Paris, one for himself and one for his master. She rapidly followed, watched the man join Lord Balmaine, hand him his ticket, and, touching his hat, disappear, no doubt to look after the luggage. Then she glided to the young nobleman.

"Dear Aubrey," she whispered, in her softest accents, and with the dangerously languishing look in her eyes she knew was so irresistible, "what are you thinking about? So sorry if I disturbed you!"

Balmaine had changed since they had last met. He

had never ceased to think of that terrible scene in the stately house in Chesham Square.

Of one thing he was sure, and he had no need to consider it in order to convince himself—he was thoroughly in Lady Lanchester's power, and how to free himself save by flight, he did not know. Anyhow, flight was his object that morning. He had arranged to go to Paris, and then to the Riviera.

"Thinking?" he faltered. "Nothing. What are you doing here, Leonie—so early?"

"I'm going to Paris. The strain on my nerves has been terrible during the last few days, and now that the poor earl has been laid to rest, I thought I should be the better for a little change."

"Yes," he answered, mechanically, "as you say, you must have had a very trying time. Did everything," he added, with an effort, "pass off satisfactorily?"

"Oh, yes!" she replied, pensively. "Your absence was a good deal remarked upon. I wish you could have summoned up courage to show yourself."

"I wrote to say I was ill," said he, feebly.

"Oh, that's all right enough," she replied, with a careless air. "At the same time, as I said just now, it would have been better had you attended. It would have lulled suspicion."

"Suspicion!" cried the young man, uneasily. "What are you talking about? You don't mean to say anybody suspects?"

"Oh, dear no! The thing is a secret between us, Aubrey. But we needn't talk any more about that miserable business. So you are going to Paris?"

"Yes," said he, in a resigned tone, "just for a day or two."

"That will suit me exactly. I want to be back in London as soon as possible. I have so many things to settle."

During the journey to Folkestone she made clever

love to the young nobleman. Never had she been more adroit. She knew how to work upon his sympathy and sentiment. They arrived at Paris; they stopped at the Hotel Bristol; they had sumptuous lunches, and luxurious dinners.

Amid all this pleasure, Leonie did not neglect the main object which had brought her to Paris—to obtain the Lanchester diamonds. The transaction was completed without a hitch. The firm handed her over the jewels, and received their £15,000, congratulating the lady on being in time to save them the trouble of putting the stones into the market.

The sense of power, of victory, lent Leonie a charm which was irresistible. Any conquest over a man imparted a dazzling brilliancy to her eyes, and gave her cheek and lips a roseate tinge, which almost suggested a being of another world—a world of fallen angels, for there was nothing pure, nothing innocent, in her beauty. They returned to London together.

A curious lull in Leonie's affairs came about after her return from Paris. Used as she was to a constant round of feverish excitement, she could not understand nothing happening. The odd thing was that it looked as if all her men had deserted her. Balmaine did not write. Where was Alec Helston? What was Carew doing?

At last she could endure the uncertainty and her restlessness no longer. She called at Balmaine's Mayfair mansion. The blinds were drawn at every window. This gave her a shock. Surely he was not dead. A maid-servant opened the door, and the countess made her inquiry.

"His lordship's gone abroad, I believe, madame," said the girl.

"Abroad? Where?" she gasped, at last.

"To America, I think. I'll send the housekeeper to you. She knows more than I do."

The housekeeper's information sent Leonie into a paroxysm of rage. Lord Balmaine had gone to New York, and proposed continuing his journey to San Francisco, with some shooting in the Rockies.

"Coward! Coward!" she muttered, as she wheeled round, and walked rapidly away.

CHAPTER XXX

AT BAY!

LEONIE hardly knew where she was going or what she was doing until she found herself in Piccadilly Circus. It was not often that she sought a remedy for a shock to her nerves in stimulants, but the present crisis was wholly exceptional. She entered a restaurant and café, and called for a liqueur brandy.

She had not been sitting at one of the marble-topped tables more than five minutes, when she caught sight of Peter Carew. He was accompanied by a man with whom he was talking earnestly, and in a low voice. Leonie knew this man, Dave Adams, though she had not seen him for nearly five years. He was a Scotland Yard detective.

She had no desire to be recognised, and she instantly rose, keeping her face turned from the two men. She was half-way to the entrance of the café, when she felt her arm touched lightly.

"Leonie," whispered someone behind her, "just a moment. I want to have a word with you."

The voice was Carew's. She had to stop. He stepped to her side. Their eyes met. Carew, she saw, was looking very pale and worn.

"What's the matter?" said she, in a tone of solicitude.

"I've had a terrible loss. Haven't you seen an advertisement in the newspapers about stolen bank-notes?"

"No, indeed. I've been away in Paris. I left the morning after our visit to Hampstead Heath. It was an unlucky night."

"Unlucky? By Jove, it was disastrous! I had my pocket picked, whether with you or directly afterwards, I can't say."

"You, the careful Carew, to be victimised by a common pick-pocket! It's amazing! How did it happen?"

"My dear Leonie, that's exactly what I would like to know. My impression is that the thing was part of a plan. Anyhow, the money's gone, and van Buren and Christopher Pintos have insisted upon my making good the loss."

"Look here, Peter," said she, "I shall be coming into my money very shortly. Would £5,000 be of any use to you?"

"Ah, Leonie," he cried, "I always said you were a trump. But I can't take your money. I'd much rather lay hands on the thief. Indeed, that's what's brought me here. The C.I.D. men tell me that that class of gentry make this place a sort of rendezvous, and—by Jove! there's the scoundrel!"

Carew rushed towards the vestibule. A man with a flesh-coloured patch over one eye was entering. He caught sight of Leonie and her companion, wheeled round, and darted through the swing doors, Carew after him at full speed.

The man was Alec Helston. Leonie's heart went cold. Her instinct told her what Helston would think. That she had given him away to Carew!

She felt she was in instant danger. For all that, she must see the episode to its end, and she pressed forward with the crowd, the detective at their head. A knot of excited people, swaying to and fro, were outside the café entrance. A violent struggle was going on. Leonie could see Carew erect, in a threatening attitude.

An opening in the crowd revealed to her Helston, writhing on the ground. Carew had, unintentionally, struck his injured eye, the sight of which Max Barnard's missile had entirely destroyed. He was suffering intense agony! The detective had joined Carew. The two were whispering. The helmets of a couple of uniform men were bobbing above the heads of the crowd. Presently the constables got Helston on his feet. The detective brought his wrists close together, and Leonie saw something flash in the sunlight—a pair of handcuffs.

"What's this for?" he demanded, fiercely.

"It's all right, Alec. You'll know, when you're at the station," returned the detective, coldly.

"And the cat who's split upon me? What about her?"

"Who's the cat?"

"Leonie Marras. Calls herself the Countess of Lanchester. She's no more a countess than you are, Dave Adams. She's inside. I saw her. This chap who went for me's her fancy man."

Leonie waited to hear no more. So far as Helston was concerned, the game was up. Flight was inevitable. Nobody knew so much about her as Helston, and it was certain he would let out all he knew.

One danger, and the most terrible of all, still faced her—Max Barnard, whom she had betrayed to the police years ago.

That he had escaped from Dartmoor on purpose to avenge himself on her, she knew full well, and now that, thanks to Helston's spite, there was a possibility of her identity being revealed, Max was certain to track her down, unless he were captured before he could do so.

"It's a toss-up, which of us two Scotland Yard will nab first," she muttered.

She burst into a reckless, hysterical laugh, at the oddity of the situation, terrible though it was.

She hailed a taxi, and in less than ten minutes was at the private entrance to her rooms. The room was exactly as she had left it. She had planned out everything.

Then she packed a Gladstone bag with a few articles of clothing, beneath which were her jewels, not forgetting the Lanchester diamonds. Her money, all in bank-notes, she placed in a pocket-book. The amount was considerable, and she had no anxiety financially.

While she was thus pondering, the sound of voices outside suddenly caught her ear. One of these voices was that of Pinwell, her maid, the others were men's voices, which she did not recognise.

The next moment she was at the door, listening intently.

"I tell you her ladyship is out, and I haven't the key of her rooms," Pinwell was saying, in agitated tones.

"Very well, then, we must break the door in," was the reply.

Leonie knew what this meant. Scotland Yard had wasted no time. The next minute the room was empty. She was speeding down the secret staircase.

A reader in a public newsroom in the east of London was poring over a newspaper. His eyes were fixed on a certain column of news, from which they never moved. This man was decently dressed; a beard and moustache, of probably three months' growth, covered his chin and upper lip; his complexion was of a deadly pallor. His face was without character, indeed, almost expressionless.

The column which had so magnetised him was headed: "The Belfry Murder. Extraordinary developments." And below the headline ran the following:

"Consequent upon the arrest of a man named

Alexander Helston, alleged to be implicated in the daring robbery of a large sum in bank-notes from the person of Mr. Peter Carew, of the firm of van Buren, Pintos & Carew, diamond merchants, his lodgings were searched, and a sensational discovery was made, which may have a bearing upon the mysterious murder of the Rev. Maurice Bradley, vicar of Lanchester. This discovery was an air pistol, of very curious construction, the missile used being a long needle, in place of a bullet, and it will be recollected that one of the puzzles of the Lanchester Church tragedy was that death resulted from the heart of the deceased being pierced by a long needle-shaped implement. The one found in the vicar's body is said to be identical with two found in Helston's room.

"The police, it is rumoured, have in their possession a statement made by Helston which, if true, involves a lady of title, well-known in smart society. It may also be mentioned that Messrs. van Buren, Pintos & Carew are the firm from whom was stolen a diamond of enormous value, and said to be the largest in the world. Helston is known to the police as the member of a gang of jewel thieves. Whether Helston had anything to do with the missing diamond remains to be seen.

"Another significant fact is that the convict, Max Barnard, who escaped some three months ago from Dartmoor, and who is still at large, was also a jewel thief. Barnard, it will be recollected, is believed to have perpetrated the murder in the belfry."

The final paragraph was headed "Later," and was to the effect that the Harwich police had raked up the inquest on a passenger by the Rotterdam steamer, who was found drowned a week or so previous to the Lanchester murder, when it was discovered that death was caused not by drowning, but by a needle in the heart similar to that found on the vicar's body.

The reader turned from the newspaper, slowly crossed the room to the entrance, and passed into the street.

CHAPTER XXXI

"WAS MY WIFE?—IS MY WIFE."

PETER CAREW was sitting in his office, his elbows on his writing desk, his hands supporting his chin. He had had hardly any sleep the night before, and he was thoroughly depressed and distracted.

Helston had been brought up at the police court the previous day, and remanded. The definite charge was the theft of the bank-notes, but it was intimated that other charges might be forthcoming. Helston's statement to the police was alluded to, but was not put in.

After the magisterial examination, Carew had a long conference with the C.I.D. authorities, and they made known to him the discovery of the needle-pistol at Helston's lodgings. This fact, together with the accusation against Leonie contained in Helston's statement, worried him intensely. When the police told him of their failure to arrest her, he had a secret sense of relief.

"The fact is, Mr. Carew, that woman's a perfect devil," said the chief. "She's up to every move on the board."

Carew could say nothing. It was as much as he could do to prevent his face from betraying his feelings.

"She must have been in the café at the same time as you and Sergeant Adams," the official continued. "No doubt she had an appointment with Helston."

"But," said Carew, with an effort, "she couldn't have been friends with Helston. When he gave her away he spoke in tones of the bitterest hatred."

"My dear sir, that goes for nothing. Crooks are ready on the slightest provocation to hate each other."

"I can hardly bring myself to think it," Carew said to himself, in the quietude of his office, "but upon my word, it's on the cards that, as the police suggest, Helston and Leonie are pals, and that she and that blackguard wangled the bank-note dodge."

A tap came at the door. Peck, the old clerk, entered to announce a visitor, a man who would not give his name.

"I hate people afraid to say who they are. Well, show him up, Peck, but be about in case I want you."

The visitor walked into the room with an air of caution, as though he was on his guard, and cast a furtive glance about him. Then he closed the door, and advanced towards the table where Carew was sitting.

"Well, sir," said the latter, "what can I do for you?"

"I've brought you something, Mr. Carew."

He thrust his hand into his breast pocket, and drew out an india-rubber pouch, from which he extracted a mass of glitter and sparkle, and placed it before the astounded Peter Carew.

"Is that your property?" he inquired, quietly.

Without a doubt, it resembled in colour and size and cutting, the diamond of which the firm had been robbed. But he was not satisfied. Scales were on the table. He weighed it. The weight was exact, to a grain. It was of a certainty *the* diamond.

"Where did you get this? Who are you?" he asked, breathlessly.

"You don't remember me then, Mr. Carew?"

"No—hanged if I do."

"Not some five years ago, when you gave evidence against me at the Old Bailey?"

"What—Max Barnard?" he burst out.

"So I was called then, but it is not my real name."

Carew stared hard at the man.

"You're a strange fellow, Barnard. You don't seem to mind putting your head in the lion's jaws. What's to prevent me sending my clerk for a constable? As for myself, well, since the visit here of you and your friends—the visit which sent you to the Old Bailey—I've taken precautions which you'll admit are quite justified."

Carew opened a drawer, and took from it a revolver.

"Perfectly justified, but before you alarm yourself, it might be as well if you heard what I have to say. That diamond, for instance. Wouldn't you like to know how it came into my hands?"

"You're right," said Carew, relinquishing the revolver and throwing himself back in his chair. "Go on. Say what you please."

"One night, some three months ago, I saw a woman burying something in a newly-made grave, in Lanchester churchyard. I dug up that pouch after she'd gone, and found inside what I took to be a piece of glass. I hadn't the slightest idea it was a real diamond. It was far too big. I knew nothing of your loss. Many weeks went over before I read about the affair at Parkeston, and it was not until this morning, when in a public newsroom, that I learned all the particulars. They vitally concerned me. This morning's papers described a pistol of unusual construction the police found in Helston's lodgings. The pistol was my invention. The name —Max Barnard—is on the stock. There's not another weapon like it in the whole world. Obviously it was used to send the man who had your diamond upon him, and the vicar of Lanchester, to their doom. What inference do you draw from that, Mr. Carew?"

"I prefer not to draw one. I'll only say that it doesn't follow because the pistol was the same in both instances, that the inventor was the man who made use of it to murder."

"Thank you. That pistol, Helston stole from me."

"May I ask what was your object in inventing so diabolical a weapon?"

"No object at all, save an exercise in devil-like ingenuity. I wasn't the only man who went murder-mad during the war. The *flechette* or arrow, dropped from an aeroplane, and capable of penetrating man and horse at one stroke, was considered an advance upon explosive bombs. *Turpinite*, which could asphyxiate a regiment, and leave every man standing dead, was hailed with delight——"

"Yes, yes, but those were fairy tales," interrupted Carew, impatiently.

"What did that matter? The fever of scientific slaughter was on. I had it badly. I hoped the War Office people would adopt my new pistol."

"Look here, Barnard, let's come to common-sense. You've done my firm an immeasurable service, and what bothers me is what return I can make to you."

"Your duty is to give me up to the police. Haven't I committed a couple of murders? The evidence is dead against me. The needle-pistol was my invention. It bears my name. No one will believe my story as to how I got hold of the diamond. Having it in my possession will be quite sufficient to hang me for the Parkeston murder. Wasn't I concealed in the belfry of Lanchester church when the vicar was struck down? Who could have killed him, save me?"

"You're in a confoundedly tight corner, that I admit, but hang me if I move a step to keep you there. I take it you want to make yourself safe."

"I can see my way to do that."

"Righto. Hadn't you better get a move on, sharp? What about money——?"

"I don't want any," the convict interjected. "Tell me who is the society woman referred to in the newspaper report."

"I'm sure I don't know," said Carew.

"You do know," he burst out. "Why should she figure in this business if she weren't Helston's confederate? There's only one woman in the world who'd take up with such a cowardly cad. That woman was my ruin. You knew her, Carew, before I was entangled in that net of villainy that did for me. I'm not blaming you. You were only one of the many fools that danced to her piping. She was my wife. *Was* my wife?—*Is* my wife! Curse her—curse her! I was a nuisance to her—drink, Carew, drink—she wanted to be rid of an incumbrance, and she gave me away. *I* wasn't the one who downed old man Burrows. I was on the stairs to give the signal if anybody came. But what was the use of telling the judge and jury so? I was the scapegoat, and I faced the music. But not for long. I swore that to myself, when I was hustled from the dock. I—I—I——"

He would have fallen, but for Carew's promptness. His face suddenly crimsoned.

Barnard rallied, but could not speak. His breath came, but slowly, and with jerks. Presently, the spasms abated somewhat. "Mr. Carew," he whispered, huskily, "I only want to live long enough for my vengeance on the vilest woman on earth. After that——"

He raised his hand with an effort, and beckoned to Carew to come nearer.

Carew obeyed, and heard him murmuring:

"After that, the next world, if there is one. What's the good of a murderer living. He's taken another's life, let him give his own in return. Isn't that so?"

What answer could Carew make—especially to one over whom death apparently was hovering?

"That man in the belfry. It was he whom I murdered! But how did I know he was my brother?"

"Your brother! Impossible!"

"Oh, it's quite true. It was not my hand that struck him down—and yet in a way it was. Maurice Bradley was the best of brothers, and I his slayer, the worst!"

CHAPTER XXXII

WHERE CAREW'S NOTES WENT

THE convict's announcement that Leonie was his wife, did not come as a surprise upon Carew. Helston had said as much, in his statement, and this it was that had led the police to decide upon her arrest. But the assertion of the relationship between the hunted man and the murdered vicar was a different matter. No wonder Carew looked as much puzzled as horrified. What was the mystery underlying Clement Bradley's strange words?

"I don't understand you," said he, hesitatingly.

"Of course you don't. There's been a lot in the newspapers about my escape, and my being in the belfry when Maurice was murdered. Some of the stuff's true, some's invention. I'll tell you what happened. I was lying dead beat in front of the belfry fire when I heard someone coming up the stairs. I sprang up, and rushed to the door leading to the bell-loft, and here I hid. I could hear footsteps in the belfry below, and the sound of the fire being raked out. Then came more footsteps and voices—voices in anger—one voice was a woman's. Just a word or two—a sort of scuffle, and a heavy fall and all was still."

"After a while, I went back to the belfry. The

burning embers gave me light enough to see a man lying on the floor. His stillness, his attitude, the little pool of blood by his head, terribly alarmed me. It might have been an accident, or it might have been a crime. If the latter, I was in a frightful position. It was certain if I was found there, I should be arrested. And wasn't I an escaped convict? Flight was the only thing. I crept down to the church, saw the collection box, took what was inside, and ran my hardest to the woods. When I thought it was safe to do so, I returned to the belfry, and remained there, knowing it wouldn't be searched a second time. The man whom I had left lying there had, of course, been taken away. I had no idea what had happened. My one thought was to get away. If it had been you, wouldn't it have been your thought?"

"Oh, I suppose so," said Carew. "Anyhow, you lied. I'm not going to ask you where you were when the hue and cry was hot."

"And I shouldn't tell you. It doesn't matter. All I need say is that by accident, I learnt from a scrap of newspapers that in two murders the same weapon had been used. That weapon, Mr. Carew, as I've told you, was *my* invention. That's why I say I was Maurice's murderer, and—and—— Can't you see that both murders must have been Helston's work. He alone had the pistol. What weapon have suited him better? Noiseless and fatal! But that—that woman—my wife, must have been in it, too. Diamonds are her craze. *I* knew it was she who buried that stone—it was she whose voice I heard in the belfry, though I did not recognise it at the time. It could have been no other woman. Wasn't she posing as the Countess of Lanchester? Isn't Lanchester Court within a stone's throw of the church? What's more easy? The two together, you know. She and Helston—damn him."

"For all that, I can't make out why she should

have desired the death of your brother. He must have been a perfect stranger to her."

"That's where you're wrong. He knew her quite well. It would have been her ruin if they had ever come face to face. No consequences would have prevented him from denouncing her—a false countess—a bigamist—a temptress of men—an associate of thieves! He was in France when my life was smashed up by that woman. I wrote to him to that effect, and urged him not to seek further. I told him it would be useless, as I had been passing under an assumed name."

"He never knew the truth, then?"

"He did his best to discover it. In spite of my letter he got leave of absence, and came over. How he tracked down Leonie, I don't know. Anyhow, he found his way to the night club where she and I used to go. He saw the vile crowd, and Holman among them. He tackled Leonie direct. She swore she knew no Clement Bradley. There was a devil of a row, and Maurice was turned out. Leonie told me all about it the same night, jeeringly. I could have strangled her. She had me in a cleft stick. It was the day after the Burrows business. The next morning she gave me away to the police. I mustn't tell you any more. You know the rest."

All this was jerked out, amid pantings and painful pauses. The man's strength was gone. His eyelids drooped, his lips were ashen. Brandy was of no avail.

Carew rushed towards the door to send fetch for a doctor, and was half-way across the room when the door opened. Peck had his fingers on the handle, behind him was Leonie Marras!

"You?" exclaimed Carew, recoiling a step. "What in the name of all that's evil has brought you? Go! You mustn't come in."

"Dear Peter, you're not afraid of me, are you?

But perhaps I'm in the way. A new lady love, what?" she returned, mockingly.

"Your husband's here. He's dying."

"I don't believe you. I have no husband."

"Not the man who's known as Max Barnard?"

The mocking smile fled. Her eyes seemed to be gazing at something afar off.

"Peck," said Carew, "fetch a doctor."

"Max dying, do you tell me?" Leonie went on, drily. "So much the better."

"He's told me his story, and——"

"Oh, I dare say," she broke in, impatiently. "I don't want to hear it, but I'd like to know how he came to look you up. To beg your pardon for that affair of five years ago?"

"No, something that'll interest you far more. He's restored the diamond stolen on its way from Amsterdam to Harwich. Perhaps you can tell me how the messenger was robbed and murdered?"

"I know nothing about it," returned Leonie, perfectly unmoved. "Have you any more offensive questions to put?"

"I've nothing further to say. I beg you to excuse me. A dying man's within that room. I must go to him."

He was wheeling round, when Leonie grasped his arm.

"Look here, Peter, don't let's have any heroics. Better come back to level-headedness. Max, you say, is dying—if so, you can't prevent him. He always had a weak heart. I'm glad you've got your diamond back. I'd rather you had it than that white-livered skunk, Helston. But how did Max come by the thing?"

"He tells me he saw a woman—he believes now to be you—bury it in a grave in Lanchester churchyard. What do you say to that?"

"It's right enough. You'd have thought the

stone was pretty safe, in a grave, wouldn't you? It only shows how plaguey difficult it is to hide a thing in this world."

Her grasp on his arm tightened.

"One minute, and you shall go to your dying man. Shortly I shall be a hunted woman, just as Max Barnard——"

"Why not Clement Bradley?"

"Oh, you know that, do you? Tell me, what did Helston say about me in his statement?"

The old, wheedling tone crept into her voice, the old, seductive light in her eyes. At one time the enticing combination would have been irresistible. Even now, Carew was not unconscious of its power.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't know," said he, with an effort. "Helston asserts that you're Leonie Marras, who four years ago belonged to a gang of jewel thieves—that you're Max Barnard's wife—that you committed bigamy in marrying Lord Lanchester—that you're not entitled to a farthing of the late earl's money—that you've the stolen diamond in your keeping—that it was you who robbed me of my money."

Wrenching himself free from Leonie's grip, Carew darted into his office. A minute of suspense, and he re-appeared. Leonie, as still and as expressionless as a statue, was awaiting him.

"He's dead," said Carew, in a low voice.

"So it's settled," said she.

"What's settled?"

"Everything. Just think. Max was doing time for a murderous assault and robbery. Max escapes. He reaches Lanchester. He is in the belfry when the vicar is struck down. His footprints were unmistakable. What did he do after he escaped from Dartmoor? Plenty of time for him to go to Parkeston, and shoot the man who had the diamond. The proof is that he brought the stone to you. Doesn't

everything fit in like a jig-saw puzzle? Won't it satisfy the clever lawyers and the fools of police?"

"Oh, it's an admirable story," said Carew, sarcastically. "And what about Helston, who had this remarkable pistol in his keeping?"

"Helston can tell what fairy-tale he pleases. Don't forget that the name of Max Barnard's on the pistol. That's another link in the chain."

"Yes, a chain of lies."

"Who's to prove that? Can you? Will your story be believed? How are you going to get over the fact that you were so thick with me? Good-bye, Peter. You're a good fellow, but you're out of it in a crook's game."

She held out her hand. Carew kept his straight down by his side.

"All right, chappie. As you please. By the way, you may like to know that it was I who pinched your bank-notes. A beastly mean thing to do, of course, but I was driven to it. The money came in very handy. If I strike lucky, I may some day be able to return it. So long!"

And as she vanished down the staircase, she put her dainty hand to her lips, and blew him a kiss.

. . . . . .

"I've travelled on liners before, and I guess I'm pretty hardened to the brazenness of women, but really, Mrs. Sybil Montague, as she calls herself is *the* limit."—"Yes, indeed. We hadn't been twenty-four hours out, before she had every man buzzing round her, from the captain downwards. Of course, one can't deny she's handsome, though she isn't my style, but—well—there—" "At the same time, my dear, she's no chicken. Not a day less than thirty, but she knows how to make the best of herself—" "That sort of woman generally does. It's part of her profession—" "Anyway, she can't want for money. Her diamonds are a dream. She's got a

necklace and bracelets, in an old-fashioned setting, lovely. My husband says they're genuine, and he's a judge. What I'd like to know is, why is she going to South Africa?"—"If it's to pick up a millionaire, she's in a fair way to succeed. That hideous, coarse brute, Christopher Pintos, is fairly gone on her."—"An odd taste. The son of a Portuguese father and a Malay mother! A wealthy woman hasn't any need to marry a rich man."—"I doubt if she really has much money. You may depend upon it, what she has she carries on her back."—"Not much of it there. It's disgracefully bare, positively indecent, I call it."—"Oh, well, you know what I mean; her jewels."—"If she's gone on diamonds, Pintos can give her plenty. Why shouldn't she marry him?"

Thus the critical and somewhat censorious remarks of a coterie of ladies, in a corner of the concert saloon of the South African liner, Donallan Castle. The subject of their free comments was a porpoise-like man and an extremely handsome woman. They were seated on a lounge in an alcove. An electric light with a crimson shade threw a subdued glow over the two, adding to the ugliness of the man and the beauty of the woman. His arm was resting along the back of the lounge, and he could, if he liked, fondle her neck, and play with her brownish-gold hair.

In the midst of his amorous whispers, a steward brought him a letter. It contained a Marconigram. Pintos broke open the envelope, and his swarthy face purpled.

"Damnation!—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Monty, but I can't help it."

"What's the matter, my dear man?"

"I've told you, haven't I, about the stolen diamond—the biggest in the world, and why I sold out of my firm and turned up London?"

"I think you mentioned something of the kind," rejoined the lady, languidly. "What of it?"

"The bally thing's turned up. It was stolen by an escaped convict, and the fool took it to Carew. That's Carew's story. It's a damned lie! I'll swear Carew knew where the stone was, all the time, and queered my pitch. Thinking the diamond was gone for ever, I took a much less sum to go out of the business than I was entitled to. If I'd thought there was the ghost of a chance of the stone being found, I'd have stuck to my guns and waited a month or two longer."

"You'd have missed a good deal if you had."

"What do you mean?"

"You'd have missed meeting me. Surely I'm as good as a diamond."

"By gad, Mrs. Monty, you're right. As for diamonds—damn it, these you're wearing 'll take some beating. Who gave 'em to you, eh?"

"My late husband, of course. Who else would?"

"Hosts of men would. *I* would. You know that, don't you?"

"I know nothing until it really happens."

"Then you take no risks?"

"Oh, plenty, if the prize is worth winning."

She laughed—a low rippling, dangerous laugh. He chuckled. They understood one another.

THE END.

Printed and Published
by
Federation Press, Ltd., 61-62 Chancery Lane,
London, W.C.2.

Printing Works, Dublin